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## **Setting a New Beginning in US-Muslim Relations President Obama and the Arab Awakening**

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PhD Thesis

Department of War Studies

King's College London

# **Setting a New Beginning in US-Muslim Relations: President Obama and the Arab Awakening**

Eugenio Lilli

*To my mom and dad,*

*without whose continued support*

*this project would not have been possible*

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## **Abstract**

Early in his presidency, Barack Obama announced that setting a new beginning in US-Muslim relations would be a top-priority of his administration. To what extent did President Obama's foreign policy actually represent a paradigm shift in the traditional US foreign policy toward the Muslim world, and especially toward the Greater Middle East? This research assesses change or continuity in the foreign policy of the United States toward arguably one of the most geo-strategically important regions of the world.

To provide an exhaustive answer to our research question, we undertake a study of US foreign policy at three different levels: foreign policy rhetoric, foreign policy practice, and the relationship between the two. First, we demonstrate that US rhetoric has been consistently influenced by the time-honored idea of national exceptionalism and its foreign policy spin-off, the myth of innocence. Second, with regard to US practice, we argue that the national interest is a multifaceted concept and a fundamental driver of foreign policy. We also identify the core national interests that have traditionally informed US foreign policy toward the Greater Middle East: access to the region's energy resources, containment of hostile powers, policies to counter terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the special relationship with Israel, and democracy promotion. Third, we show that US Middle East policy has often been characterized by a noticeable disconnect between foreign policy rhetoric and foreign policy practice.

Finally, we analyze President Obama's Middle East policy to assess whether it represented a significant break with the tradition of US foreign policy toward the Greater Middle East. In order to do that, this research focuses on the transformative events that upset the region in 2011, and especially on a comparative analysis of the first Obama administration's response to the popular uprisings in Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and Syria.

# PART ONE

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## Introduction

Hope and change. These words have been the trademark of the Barack Obama administration since the days of its electoral campaign. In what became known as the Yes, We Can Speech, presidential candidate Obama declared: “Yes, we can, to justice and equality. Yes, we can, to opportunity and prosperity. Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can repair this world. Yes, we can.” Besides characterizing Barack Obama’s statements, ideas of hope and change also dominated campaign ads, bumper stickers, t-shirts, and pins. The *leitmotif* of the Obama team’s public rhetoric was one emphasizing its willingness to represent a turning point from the previous George W. Bush administrations.<sup>1</sup>

On 4 June 2009, standing before a predominantly Muslim audience at Cairo University, Egypt, President Obama stated:

*“I am honored to be in the timeless city of Cairo [...] We meet at a time of tension between the United States and Muslims around the world [...] [T]ension has been fed by colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims, and a Cold War in which Muslim-majority countries were too often treated as proxies without regard to their own aspirations. Moreover, the sweeping change brought by modernity and globalization led many Muslims to view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam [...] This has bred more fear and mistrust [...] This cycle of suspicion and discord must end [...] I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect.”*<sup>2</sup>

The Cairo Speech will probably be remembered as the most famous example of President Obama’s public commitment to set a *new beginning* with the Muslim world. However, Obama’s public outreach to Muslim communities started before his signature speech in Cairo. In January 2009, during his Inaugural Address, the US president had already notified Muslims that the United States would “seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect.” After that, two months later in Ankara, while addressing the Turkish Parliament, President Obama declared: “The United States is not, and will never be, at war with Islam [...] We seek broader engagement based on mutual interest and mutual respect. We will listen carefully, we will bridge misunderstandings,

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<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, “Yes, We Can Speech,” January 8, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/08/us/politics/08text-obama.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>2</sup> Barack Obama, “Cairo Speech,” June 4, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?pagewanted=all>.



and we will seek common ground. We will be respectful, even when we do not agree.” Upon taking office, the US president had openly committed his administration to mend the (mis)perceptions existing between the United States and the Muslim world. The primary goal of this research is to investigate whether the first Obama administration succeeded or not in setting a new beginning in US-Muslim relations. More to the point, we are going to assess the extent to which President Obama’s foreign policy represented a paradigm shift in the traditional US foreign policy toward the Muslim world.<sup>3</sup>

In Cairo, along with promising to set a new beginning, Obama also acknowledged that previous US foreign policies toward the Muslim world had spawned *fear and mistrust* and had generated a *cycle of suspicion and discord*. The findings of two different 2007 survey polls showed the degree of suspicion and discord that existed at the time between Americans and Muslims around the world. The first survey, on Muslims’ attitudes toward the United States, revealed that an average of 75.5 percent of respondents in Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia (four predominantly Muslim countries) had a negative view of the US government; 79 percent of respondents thought a US foreign policy goal was to weaken and divide Islam; and 64 percent believed that the United States wanted to spread Christianity in the Middle East. The second survey investigated the attitudes of Americans toward Muslims and Islam. According to its findings, 35 percent of Americans (up from 29 percent in 2002) had a negative view of Muslims; a plurality of 45 percent believed that Islam encouraged violence more than other religions (39 percent disagreed with such a statement); and when asked to describe their impression of Islam in a single word, 40 percent of respondents chose the word “fanatical”. This was the distinctly ill-relationship between the United States and the Muslim world President Obama inherited when he took office.<sup>4</sup>

Obama’s message of hope and change was warmly welcomed by domestic and international public opinions alike. Domestically, the US public gave him an initial approval rating of 68 percent; placing Obama near the top of the list of the US presidents elected after the Second World War (at the same level of President Dwight Eisenhower and only behind President John Kennedy, who obtained a higher rating of 72 percent). Internationally, the Nobel Committee awarded Obama the Nobel Peace Prize for 2009, notably only a year after his inauguration. Moreover, Barack Obama’s

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<sup>3</sup> Barack Obama, “Inaugural Address 2009” (White House, January 20, 2009), [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/President\\_Barack\\_Obamas\\_Inaugural\\_Address](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/President_Barack_Obamas_Inaugural_Address); Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama to the Turkish Parliament” (White House, April 6, 2009), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-turkish-parliament>.

<sup>4</sup> Program on International Policy Attitudes, *Muslim Public Opinion on US Policy, Attacks on Civilians and Al Qaeda* (University of Maryland, April 24, 2007), [http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/apr07/START\\_Apr07\\_rpt.pdf](http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/apr07/START_Apr07_rpt.pdf); Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, *Public Expresses Mixed Views of Islam, Mormonism*, September 25, 2007, [www.pewforum.org/2007/09/26/public-expresses-mixed-views-of-islam-mormonism/#section1](http://www.pewforum.org/2007/09/26/public-expresses-mixed-views-of-islam-mormonism/#section1).

election to the US presidency had a positive effect on the image of the United States around the globe. A noticeable exception was that of the Muslim world where the US image showed very little signs of improvement. However, even in Muslim countries where the United States remained usually unpopular, significant percentages of the people polled expressed personal confidence in the newly elected US president. For example, in Egypt and Jordan, where the favorable ratings of the United States were only at 27 and 25 percent respectively, 42 and 31 percent of the respondents to a 2009 poll said they were confident President Obama would “do the right thing in world affairs.”<sup>5</sup>

How did President Obama manage to raise such high expectations? Why did his message have such strong appeal?

Certainly, change and hope are common features of electoral campaigns, not only in the United States but all over the world. Almost every candidate to a political office is ready to criticize the policies of his or her predecessors and to pledge to be different, although they often end up following very similar paths. Whatever the ability of a politician to be different, words of change and hope hold an especially solid grip in times of crisis. A country may perceive a crisis when it is experiencing a serious challenge to its military might, to its economic power, or to the integrity of its fundamental values. As of 2008, the United States was experiencing a mixture of them all. The long and costly military commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq showed the limits of the US capability to undertake two simultaneous regional armed conflicts. US economic supremacy was increasingly challenged by both new competitors (especially China) and a huge and growing federal debt. The US image as the most efficient model of economic development had been tarnished by the global financial crisis that many observers saw as primarily American made. Finally, some policies of the G.W. Bush’s Global War on Terror, as for example the use of interrogation techniques considered by many as torture, were deeply at odds with the perception of the United States as the global champion of democracy and human rights. Meanwhile, the international community was also experiencing a time of crisis. Indeed, as argued by academic John Gaddis, the administrations of G.W. Bush thought the necessary response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States was a “shock and awe” strategy aimed at shaking up the very foundations of the international system. However, Gaddis continued, such a strategy had not included a necessary

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<sup>5</sup> Gallup Poll, *Obama’s Initial Approval Ratings in Historical Context*, January 26, 2009, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/113968/Obama-Initial-Approval-Ratings-Historical-Context.aspx>; “Nobelprize.org,” 2009, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/press.html); Andrew Kohut, “Briefing to the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight,” March 4, 2010, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1512/restoring-americas-reputation-globally-gains-may-be-fragile>; Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Confidence in Obama Lifts U.S. Image Around the World*, July 23, 2009, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2009/07/23/confidence-in-obama-lifts-us-image-around-the-world/10/>.

“reassurance” part intended to put the pieces of the international system back into place.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, in 2008 the world had just started to witness what would eventually be a long period of marked global economic decline, referred to by some as the Great Recession. Given such a gloomy picture, it is little wonder that promises like *we can heal this nation* and *we can repair this world* were enthusiastically welcomed.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, simply assuming that the eight years of the G.W. Bush presidency were entirely responsible for the grim situation would be both morally unjust and scientifically inaccurate. Particularly, the *tension* President Obama referred to in the Cairo Speech was the result of several decades, and not years, of US foreign policies toward the Muslim world.

When it comes to foreign policy, in fact, US presidents have always wrestled to find an acceptable balance between the protection of the strategic national interest and the promotion of the ideal national interest. Although both constitute the US national interest broadly defined, the history of the United States is punctuated by examples where the pursuit of strategic interests –realist and socio-economic ones- conflicted with the advancement of ideal interests –values and ideas.<sup>8</sup> There is an extensive literature supporting the view that such a conflict has been especially evident, although not unique, in the case of the US foreign policy toward the region of the Greater Middle East.<sup>9</sup> According to former US Ambassador Mark Indyk *et al.*, when dealing with the Greater Middle East “every [US] president since Franklin Roosevelt has struck that balance in favor of the [strategic] national interest, downplaying the promotion of America’s democratic values because of the region’s strategic importance.” Similarly, Middle East expert Kenneth Pollack noticed that “in the Middle East, Washington set [the promotion of ideal interests] aside, both because it feared that their application to the Middle East would produce Arab States inimical to American interests and

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<sup>6</sup> John L. Gaddis, “Grand Strategy in the Second Term,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 1 (February 2005): 2–15.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Jones, “The International Order and the Emerging Powers,” in *The Arab Awakening* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011); Thomas Carothers, *Democracy Policy under Obama: Revitalization or Retreat?* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012); Open Society Foundations, *Globalizing Torture: CIA Secret Detention and Extraordinary Rendition*, 2013,

<http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/globalizing-torture-20120205.pdf>; John L. Gaddis, “Grand Strategy in the Second Term”; David Wessel, “Did ‘Great Recession’ Live Up to the Name?,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 8, 2010, sec. Capital, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303591204575169693166352882.html>.

<sup>8</sup> The concept of the US national interest, and the distinction among its realist, socio-economic, and ideal components, are thoroughly discussed in Chapter Two on US foreign policy practice.

<sup>9</sup> For the specific purpose of this research the term Greater Middle East loosely refers to the region stretching east-to-west from Afghanistan to North Africa and north-to-south from the Levant to the Arabian Peninsula.

because we [the United States] always had immediate concerns in the region that required the cooperation of America's [autocratic] Arab allies."<sup>10</sup>

At least two assumptions about the promotion of US ideal interests in the Greater Middle East lie behind the US tendency to support autocratic regimes rather than backing democratic reforms in the region.<sup>11</sup>

The first assumption is that more democratic political systems in the Greater Middle East will eventually empower public opinions largely hostile to US policies, and, consequently, make US cooperation with Middle Eastern governments much more difficult. For a long time, in fact, the United States pursued Middle East policies that were highly unpopular among local populations; text-book examples are the longstanding US unconditional support for Israel and the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq. Successive US administrations were effective in advancing such unpopular foreign policies while maintaining collaborative relations with autocratic Middle Eastern rulers. US officials feared that more democratic political systems could have the negative effect, from a US perspective, of creating Middle Eastern leaderships more responsive to local public opinions and less accommodating to US preferences. The second assumption about democracy in the Greater Middle East concerns the implicit belief among US policymakers that Muslims and Islam are somehow incompatible with democracy. Jeane Kirkpatrick, US ambassador to the United Nations in the early 1980s, made this untold assumption public when she reportedly said: "The Arab world is the only part of the world where I have been shaken in my conviction that if you let people decide, they will make fundamentally rational decisions. But there, they do not make rational decisions, they make fundamentalist ones." The fact that, over time, Islamist movements became the most popular oppositions to the autocratic regimes of the Greater Middle East only reinforced concerns in the United States about Muslims' incompatibility with democracy. Meanwhile, local rulers skillfully nurtured and used US fears for their own benefit. They

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<sup>10</sup> Mark S. Indyk, Kenneth G. Lieberthal, and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Bending History: Barack Obama's Foreign Policy* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), 142; A similar argument is made by Rashid Khalidi in his *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East* (Beacon Press, 2009); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Nicolas Bouchet, "The Democracy Tradition in US Foreign Policy and the Obama Presidency," *International Affairs* 89, no. 1 (2013); Alyssa Elridge, "No Exit: The Bush Doctrine and Continuity in U.S. Middle East Policy," *The Stanford Journal on Muslim Affairs* 3, no. 2 (2013), <http://stanford.edu/group/avicenna/cgi-bin/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Journal-3.2.pdf>; Kenneth M. Pollack, "Understanding the Arab Awakening," in *The Arab Awakening* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>11</sup> Democracy is an inherently difficult concept to define and it is beyond the scope of this research to offer a comprehensive definition of it. However, in the US public discourse, democracy promotion is commonly associated with the spread of the time-honored US values of freedom, self-determination, protection of human rights, elected-leaders, accountability, and a government that reflects the will of the people. This is also the working definition of the concept of democracy used in this research.

systematically warned US policymakers that the only alternative to their pro-West (although undemocratic) rule would be the rise to power of anti-West Islamic fundamentalists. Therefore, successive US administrations, deeply wary of Islamic fundamentalism, found it convenient to support autocratic, but friendly, regimes over democracy promotion. Of course, not all US officials accepted the two previous assumptions as the best conceptual lenses through which the United States should view democracy in the Greater Middle East. Many area experts and diplomatic personnel in the field repeatedly tried to provide a more nuanced analysis of the complex realities of the region. However, their views generally failed to gain traction among US policymakers. As a result, from the end of WWII, the United States pursued a Middle East policy that favored the maintenance of cordial relations with autocratic regimes over the promotion of democratic reforms; at least when the former was perceived in Washington as being instrumental to protect US strategic interests in the region.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps unexpectedly, it was precisely the first G.W. Bush administration that represented an exception, although brief, to this default position. In November 2003, President G.W. Bush stated:

*“Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe -because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export. And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic harm to our country and to our friends, it would be reckless to accept the status quo.”*<sup>13</sup>

Two years later, during a trip to Egypt, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reaffirmed the same concept: “For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region, here in the Middle East, and we achieved neither. Throughout the Middle East the fear of free choices can no longer justify the denial of liberty.” Despite the initial enthusiasm, the G.W. Bush administration rapidly abandoned its so-called Freedom Agenda when faced with Islamist electoral gains in Egypt and Palestine; in particular after the Islamist group Hamas, deemed a terrorist organization by the White House, won the 2006 Palestinian legislative

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival: The Politics of Ideas in the Middle East* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 269; Fawaz A. Gerges, *Obama and the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012); James Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012); The Brookings Institution, *The Arab Awakening* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/books/2011/theArabawakening>.

<sup>13</sup> George W. Bush, “President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East” (The White House, November 6, 2003), <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html>.

elections and formed a distinct government in the territory of the Gaza Strip. Disillusioned by events in Egypt and Palestine, the G.W. Bush administration reverted to the more familiar policy of favoring the protection of US strategic interests over the promotion of US ideal interests.<sup>14</sup>

As a consequence, the US policy toward the Greater Middle East has been characterized by a clear disconnect between foreign policy rhetoric, that usually praises the promotion of US values, and foreign policy practice, that mainly prioritizes the protection of US strategic interests. Professor John Mearsheimer described this disconnect as a “discernible gap” existing between a US foreign policy rhetoric grounded on lofty liberal principles and a US foreign policy practice that follows a cold realist logic. Over time, such a disconnect has had unintended negative effects: it has generated frequent charges of US hypocrisy and double standards, has severely damaged the image of the United States among Muslim communities, and has bred a fertile ground for extremist organizations to find recruits willing to undertake terrorist attacks against US citizens and assets. Negative perceptions of the 2003 invasion of Iraq are a case in point. At that time, in fact, a common view among Muslim communities was that the G.W. Bush administration had used the issue of democracy promotion as a justification for the invasion of the Gulf country only to divert public attention from the administration’s manifest failure to find weapons of mass destruction - the main initial justification for the US decision to intervene in Iraq.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to being an area of the world where the conflict between US strategic and ideal interests has been especially evident, the Greater Middle East is also a region that US policymakers have for a long time considered of vital importance. In this respect, the Obama administration represented no exception. In fact, in his pursuit for a new beginning President Obama was not moved solely by lofty principles and a willingness to amend past wrongs but, rather, the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States saw very practical benefits deriving from improved US-Muslim relations, in particular with regard to US Middle East policies. Bridging the divide between the United States and Muslim communities had the potential to result in more support, or at least less antagonism, to the presence of US troops in Afghanistan and Iraq (two Muslim-majority countries); it could lead to a more cooperative environment where to undertake the wider effort against international terrorism; it could help building the international consensus needed to contain Iran and its nuclear power aspirations; it could improve the ability of the United States to secure access to the region’s energy

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<sup>14</sup> Condoleezza Rice, “Remarks of the Secretary of State at the American University in Cairo,” June 20, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/4109902.stm>.

<sup>15</sup> John Mearsheimer, “Liberal Talk, Realist Thinking,” *University of Chicago Magazine*, February 2002, <http://magazine.uchicago.edu/0202/features/index.htm>; Charles W. Kegley, ed., *The New Global Terrorism: Characteristics, Causes, Controls* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2003); Shibley Telhami, “Arab Public Opinion: What Do They Want?,” in *The Arab Awakening* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 15.

resources; and it could perhaps facilitate the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict by making it politically easier for both Arab leaders and their Israeli counterparts to engage in negotiations with each other. In 2009, despite all the talk about the Obama administration's "pivot" toward Asia and the so-called US energy revolution (two policies that should have supposedly ushered in a period of US disengagement from the Greater Middle East), stabilization operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, fighting international terrorism, Iran's nuclear program, access to Middle Eastern energy resources, and the Arab-Israeli peace process were unquestionably top priorities in the US foreign policy agenda and they continued to be very topical issues well into President Obama's second term.<sup>16</sup>

Because it provides compelling evidence of the longstanding conflict existing between different US national interests, because of the very controversial nature of some US regional foreign policies, and because of its persistent strategic relevance for US policymakers, we believe that the study of US foreign policy toward the Greater Middle East holds special importance. Moreover, as the Greater Middle East is overwhelmingly inhabited by Muslims, this research can provide valuable insights into the nature of the US foreign policy toward the broader Muslim world.

Before assessing if President Obama's foreign policy created a significant paradigm shift in the tradition of US foreign policy toward the Muslim-majority countries of the Greater Middle East, this research defines and analyzes the two fundamental components of the United States' foreign policy: its public rhetoric and its practice. On the one hand, we maintain that US foreign policy rhetoric has been characterized by a distinct and potent national narrative that we call the myth of US innocence. This narrative depicts the United States intervening on the international stage always in reaction to external events or threats, constantly committing to just causes, and acting invariably with good intentions and for the noblest purposes. On the other hand, the foreign policy practice of the United States has advanced the country's national interest that, in turn, is the result of a complex interaction of multiple, and sometimes conflicting, interests. We group these different interests in three principal clusters: realist, socio-economic (together referred to as strategic interests), and ideal interests. As mentioned above, we hold that conflict between practice and rhetoric, and between

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<sup>16</sup> Barack Obama, "The National Security Strategy of the United States 2010," May 26, 2010; Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly 2013" (White House, September 24, 2013), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>; Kenneth M. Pollack and Ray Takeyh, "Near Eastern Promises," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3 (June 2014); Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The U.S., Asia and the Middle East: A Convergence of Interests," *Baker Institute Blog*, May 9, 2014, [http://blog.chron.com/bakerblog/2014/05/the-u-s-asia-and-the-middle-east-a-convergence-of-interests/?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=\\*Mideast%20Brief&utm\\_campaign=2014\\_The%20Middle%20East%20Daily\\_05.13.14](http://blog.chron.com/bakerblog/2014/05/the-u-s-asia-and-the-middle-east-a-convergence-of-interests/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=*Mideast%20Brief&utm_campaign=2014_The%20Middle%20East%20Daily_05.13.14); Barack Obama, "The National Security Strategy of the United States 2015," February 2015.

strategic and ideal interests, has been a distinctive feature of the US foreign policy toward the Greater Middle East.

Once we have analyzed the particular features of US foreign policy rhetoric and offered historical evidence about the traditional interests of US foreign policy practice in the Greater Middle East, we can finally move to the assessment of the Obama presidency's own record and see if his administration delivered the change the president promised in June 2009.

After more than six years since the Cairo Speech enough policy water has passed under the bridge to allow a well-informed evaluation of the first Obama administration's foreign policy record. Eminent scholars and experts have written works on President Obama's Middle East policy. Some authors have engaged in a renewed debate about US declinism, that is about the perception of the declining power of the United States in the international system. Christopher Layne argues that US quest for "extraregional hegemony" is unsustainable in the long term. It will inevitably lead to overexpansion and the stimulation of countervailing forces. Stefan Halper singles out China as the most likely challenger to US hegemony. Halper holds that the post-WWII international system based on the so-called Washington Consensus will be eventually replaced by Beijing's state capitalism. Adam Quinn's analysis suggests that US power, measured in terms of its advantage over other countries in economic and military capacity, will be shrinking significantly over the next decades. Robert Kagan takes a complete opposite stance and calls US decline a "myth". Kagan maintains that US decline is not "inevitable" and that, as in the past, the United States is likely to survive this latest time of crisis and "emerge stronger and healthier than other nations". In this research, we acknowledge that, upon taking office, the Obama administration faced considerable military, economic, and political difficulties. However, we argue that by 2011 the United States was still the single most powerful actor in the international system and decisions taken in Washington continued to affect millions of people beyond US borders.<sup>17</sup>

Other authors have focused their attention on the issue of change and continuity between the Barack Obama and the George W. Bush administrations. Robert Singh argues that, despite an early attempt at a policy of engagement, the Obama administration generally maintained, and sometimes even expanded, some more aggressive and forward-leaning aspects of G.W. Bush's foreign policy.

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<sup>17</sup> Christopher Layne, "This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana," *International Studies Quarterly* 56 (2012): 203–13; Stefan Halper, *The Beijing Consensus: How China's Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Adam Quinn, "The Art of Declining Politely: Obama's Prudent Presidency and the Waning of American Power," *International Affairs* 87, no. 4 (2011): 803–24; Robert Kagan, "Not Fade Away: The Myth of American Decline," *New Republic*, January 11, 2012, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/politics/magazine/99521/america-world-power-declinism>.



Richard Jackson's analysis highlights substantial continuity between Obama and G.W. Bush, especially with regard to the overall structure and practices of US policy of counterterrorism. Even sympathetic works, such as that of Martin Indyk *et al.*, concede that lack of change from G.W. Bush to Obama "has been most evident in regard to war fighting on the one hand and democracy promotion in the Middle East on the other". Jeffrey Bader disagrees and holds that President Obama's foreign policy represented a rupture with G.W. Bush's. Bader contends that the Obama administration's policy of engagement with China is a particularly telling example of such a rupture. Our research provides additional evidence about continuity in US foreign policy. We could not detect any significant paradigm shift in US Middle East policy during the first Obama administration. In particular, there was no compelling evidence supporting the argument that President Obama actually set a new beginning in US-Muslim relations. However, our research goes beyond the narrow goal of comparing the Obama and the G.W. Bush administrations. The purpose of this work is to put the events of the 2011 Arab Awakening in a broader historical context. We offer evidence of historical continuities in US foreign policy that date back to as early as the formation of the United States in the XVIII century.<sup>18</sup>

Yet other authors have analyzed the Obama administration's foreign policy through the lenses of a particular theory of International Relations. Adam Quinn provides an examination of US foreign policy from both a classical and a structural realist perspectives. Trevor McCrisken offers a constructivist interpretation of Obama's War on Terror. Timothy Lynch highlights the influence of liberal theories on President Obama's foreign policy decisions. Doug Stokes and David Maher apply Marxism to explain the current role of the United States in global politics and the international political economy. Although we recognize the undeniable value of these works, we argue that monotheoretical analyses of a topic as complex as US foreign policy are likely to obscure more than they reveal. For example, realist analyses, especially structural realist ones, are particularly suited to stress the importance of systemic factors (i.e. the international distribution of power) in influencing foreign policy whereas they overlook the relevance of important domestic variables. Similarly, constructivist approaches assign a critical role to ideational factors (i.e. identities, norms, narratives) while paying less attention to more traditional, realist variables of

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Singh, *Barack Obama's Post American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Engagement* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012); Richard Jackson, "Bush, Obama, Bush, Obama, Bush, Obama...: The War on Terror as a Durable Social Structure," in *Obama's Foreign Policy: Ending the War on Terror*, ed. Michelle Bentley and Jack Holland (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); Indyk, Lieberthal, and O'Hanlon, *Bending History: Barack Obama's Foreign Policy*, 259; Jeffrey Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012).

power politics. We share Christopher Layne's opinion that a more nuanced approach is needed to fully grasp the multifaceted nature of US foreign policy.<sup>19</sup>

In order to provide such a more nuanced approach, this research undertakes a systematic analysis of the first Obama administration's policy toward the Greater Middle East through the specific prism of the tension existing between US foreign policy rhetoric and US foreign policy practice. In other words, we study change in foreign policy at three distinct but interrelated levels. At the level of foreign policy rhetoric, that is in the ideas and values expressed in public statements and documents by public officials. At the level of foreign policy practice, that is in the actual foreign policies implemented on the ground. At both levels, detecting the increasing or decreasing disconnect that may exist between foreign policy rhetoric and practice. As we will show, change at each level is likely to have significant effects on the broader foreign policy of the United States. By investigating the possibility of policy change at three levels, this research goes beyond the previous works of other scholars and produces a more accurate assessment of the continuities and discontinuities in US Middle East policy during the first term of the Obama presidency.

Moreover, this research contributes to the debate on US foreign policy in three important ways. The first contribution is theoretical. We design an analytical framework based on the interaction of five core national interests (access to Middle Eastern energy resources, containment of hostile powers, policies to counter terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the special relationship with Israel, and democracy promotion) that helps to explain most major decisions of US foreign policy in the Greater Middle East since the end of WWII. The second contribution is conceptual. We carry out a methodical study and produce clear definitions of critical concepts such as the US national interest, the idea of US exceptionalism, and the foreign policy narrative of US innocence. The third contribution is empirical. We produce a detailed analysis of the transformative events of the 2011 Arab Awakening in five Arab countries (Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and Syria) and of the Obama administration's response to them.

It took some time and careful thinking to identify the best case study to test the US president's performance in setting a new beginning in US relations with the Muslim world. A number of thought-provoking and stimulating options were on the table. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq

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<sup>19</sup> Adam Quinn, "Realism and US Foreign Policy," in *Obama and the World*, ed. Inderjeet Parmar, Linda Miller, and Mark Ledwidge, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014); Trevor McCricken, "Ten Years on: Obama's War on Terrorism in Rhetoric and Practice," *International Affairs* 87, no. 4 (2011): 781–801; Timothy Lynch, "Obama, Liberalism, and US Foreign Policy," in *Obama and the World*, ed. Inderjeet Parmar, Linda Miller, and Mark Ledwidge, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014); Doug Stokes and David Maher, "Marxism and US Foreign Policy," in *Obama and the World*, ed. Inderjeet Parmar, Linda Miller, and Mark Ledwidge, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014); Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

were surely among them. However, they both were a legacy of the previous G.W. Bush administrations and not the result of an independent decision by President Obama. Despite the indisputable academic appeal of controversial topics such as the closure of the Guantanamo Bay detention facility, the use of torture during interrogations, and drone strikes to target terrorists, the option of the US Global War on Terror was discarded for the same reason. Then, there was Iran and the country's nuclear program. The topic seemed very promising insofar as at the beginning of his mandate President Obama publicly declared to be ready to start with the Islamic Republic of Iran an "engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect." In an interview with the UAE-based television channel *Al Arabiya* the US president stated that if Iran unclenched its fist, it would find an extended hand from the United States. Nevertheless, we concluded that the US-Iranian relationship was too narrowly focused on the issue of nuclear proliferation to represent an all-encompassing case study. Finally, although the crisis in Sudan, that resulted in the division of the country and in the creation of the new independent state of South Sudan in July 2011, also represented a potential case study, its implications for the international community and the United States were minor issues compared to the others under consideration.<sup>20</sup>

Hence, we eventually settled for an analysis of the so-called Arab Awakening.<sup>21</sup> There are five main reasons behind this choice. First of all, these popular uprisings against autocratic regimes across the Greater Middle East were unexpected, at least in terms of their timing and magnitude, and exploded two years after President Obama took office. The US response, therefore, was not an obvious legacy of previous US administrations. Secondly, the Arab Awakening offered a historic opportunity to President Obama to reverse a vicious cycle of misperceptions in US-Muslim relations and set the new beginning he had envisioned in Cairo. In fact, the US president faced the challenge to strike a difficult balance between the longstanding US policy of support for local autocratic regimes and the wholehearted embrace of calls for democratic reforms. Thirdly, the Arab Awakening had and will continue to have major implications for the current and future influence of the United States in the region. These pro-democracy popular uprisings shook the very foundations of the *Pax Americana* in the Greater Middle East. The United States' two main Arab allies in the

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<sup>20</sup> Barack Obama, "Videotaped Remarks by the President in Celebration of Nowruz," March 20, 2009, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/VIDEOTAPED-REMARKS-BY-THE-PRESIDENT-IN-CELEBRATION-OF-NOWRUZ](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/VIDEOTAPED-REMARKS-BY-THE-PRESIDENT-IN-CELEBRATION-OF-NOWRUZ); Reuters, *Obama Urges Iran to "Unclench Fist,"* 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/video/2009/01/27/obama-urges-iran-to-unclench-fist?videoId=97669>.

<sup>21</sup> While it is true that the 2011 popular uprisings mainly affected Arab countries, some effects were also felt in non-Arab countries such as Turkey and Iran. Despite being Arab, the countries that experienced the full-blown Awakening are undoubtedly an integral part of the Greater Middle East with which they share both Muslim-majority populations and US foreign policies driven by similar US national interests. Therefore, for the specific purpose of this research, studying the US foreign policy response to a popular uprising demanding democratic reform in Arab Egypt or in non-Arab Turkey would make no substantial difference.

region, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, were both affected by the revolts. In Egypt, the decades-long autocratic regime led by President Hosni Mubarak was overthrown and initially replaced by a democratically-elected Islamist government. In Saudi Arabia, the Al Saud royal family felt seriously threatened and reacted by taking active steps to curb protest movements across the Persian Gulf (as a case in point, Saudi troops were deployed in neighboring Bahrain in March 2011 to support the local regime's crackdown on the opposition). The deposition of Hosni Mubarak also cast serious doubts on the future of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, and consequently, on the prospect of a resolution of the wider Arab-Israeli conflict. On top of that, the Arab Awakening brought to light existing tensions within the Muslim world itself, above all between Shiite and Sunni communities, as sectarian clashes in Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria clearly showed. These tensions only added concern about the future stability of such a volatile, yet strategically important, region of the world. Fourthly, we decided to study the Arab Awakening because events occurring in the Greater Middle East do matter to US public opinion. According to a 2012 survey, 73 percent of Americans still identified that area of the world as the major source of future threats to the United States compared to only 19 percent identifying Asia, and seven percent elsewhere. A final reason that makes the case of the Arab Awakening particularly significant is that we have probably not yet felt the full impact of these popular uprisings. The forces that have been unleashed by the turmoil in the Greater Middle East will likely affect the region for years, or decades, to come. In fact, unless local governments address the underlying causes of popular grievance that generated the uprisings in the first place, it is probable that both the countries that experienced regime change and those that resisted it in 2011 will face future waves of unrest.<sup>22</sup>

## Studying Foreign Policy

Before beginning our analysis of the foreign policy of the United States specifically, we thought useful to examine the general concept of foreign policy.

Defining political activities is a difficult task and the case of foreign policy makes no exception. A first definition maintains that "foreign policy exists in the space created by states' existence and by their very lack of omnipotence. Its rationale is to mediate the impact of the external on the domestic and to find ways of projecting a particular set of concerns in a very intractable world." This

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<sup>22</sup> Dina Smeltz, *Foreign Policy in the New Millennium* (Chicago: The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2012), 25, [http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/Task%20Force%20Reports/2012\\_CCS\\_Report.pdf](http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/Task%20Force%20Reports/2012_CCS_Report.pdf); Ana Echague, ed., *The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings* (Spain: FRIDE, 2013).

definition points out foreign policy's *raison d'être*. Another definition sheds light on the "content" of foreign policy and on the actors involved in it: "foreign policy involves goals, strategies, measures, methods, guidelines, directives, understandings, agreements and so on, by which national governments conduct international relations with each other and with international organizations and non-governmental actors." A last definition highlights the decisive role played by human decision-makers: "[foreign policy consists of the] decisions taken by human decision-makers with reference to or having known consequences for entities external to their nation-state."<sup>23</sup>

Drawing on the insights of the previous definitions, in our research we consider a state's foreign policy to be the set of official policies that national policymakers undertake in order to advance their country's main objectives (referred to as the national interest) and that have some kind of intended consequence outside national borders.<sup>24</sup>

Foreign policy is commonly regarded as an exceptional issue area not only by specialists but also by policymakers and the general public alike. The relevance of this exceptionality is particularly evident if we consider democratic societies, as in our case of the United States. Indeed, specific needs of foreign policy are more likely to create tensions with some democratic standard procedures of general policymaking than the needs of any other policy area. In the words of an attentive XVIII century observer, French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville, "foreign politics demand scarcely any of those qualities which are peculiar to a democracy; they require, on the contrary, the perfect use of almost all those in which it is deficient." Such an interpretation of foreign policy was also emphasized by James Madison, one of the founding fathers of the United States, "the management of foreign relations appears to be the most susceptible of abuse, of all the trusts committed to a Government, because they can be concealed or disclosed, or disclosed in such parts and at such times as will best suit particular views; and because the body of the people are less capable of judging and are more under the influence of prejudices, on that branch of their affairs, than of any other." The tensions stemming from this exceptionality include those between the needs of *realpolitik* and the rule of law, security concerns and requirements of due process, secrecy and transparency, discretion and accountability, and preference for unified direction and pluralism. The

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<sup>23</sup> Christopher Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 31; Robert H. Jackson and Georg Soerensen, *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 223; Valerie M. Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis* (Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 4.

<sup>24</sup> Here, we intentionally use the adjective "official" because we want to limit our analysis to foreign policy decisions taken by individuals holding positions of authority to commit the national resources of the state while excluding the great number of other international transactions being conducted by other actors. In addition, in our definition we specifically refer to the foreign policy of states and not to that of other international actors, as for example the European Union. For a definition that includes also such international actors see Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy*, 3; Eugene R. Wittkopf and James McCormick, *The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

exceptional nature of foreign policy also makes the job of foreign policy analysts harder insofar as “in the world of foreign policy [...] the actual decisions (and indecisions) made may not be immediately observable to the analyst. Indeed, they may be secret, and may remain so for decades due to national security concerns.”<sup>25</sup>

In order to study this exceptional subject, our research makes wide use of insights drawn on that tradition of writing known as Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). Academics Robert Jackson and Georg Soerensen offer a first basic definition of FPA: “foreign policy analysis is a study of the management of external relations and activities of nation-states, as distinguished from their domestic policies.” Another useful definition of FPA by *Foreignpolicyanalysis.org*, a University of Missouri’s reputable publication, holds that: “in the simplest terms, [Foreign Policy Analysis] is the study of the process, effects, causes, or outputs of foreign policy decision-making in either a comparative or case-specific manner.” With regard to this second definition, we argue that it would be more accurate to substitute the expression “decision-making” with “policymaking”. In fact, the former is only one phase of the latter and it focuses the attention too narrowly on the decision itself, while it downplays other critical phases of the process such as the agenda setting and the policy implementation.<sup>26</sup>

Foreign Policy Analysis as a discipline is commonly considered a subfield of International Relations (IR). There has been a lively debate over the years on whether IR theories are an appropriate instrument for studying states’ foreign policy. Kenneth Waltz, the founder of Neorealism, says that the main goal of IR theories is to try to explain the nature of the international system and its effects on patterns of outcomes of states’ interactions such as conflict and cooperation, and war and peace. Although Waltz acknowledges that IR theories also provide some explanations for individual states’ behavior, he maintains that such theories cannot explain single

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<sup>25</sup> Foley Michael, “Executive, Congress, Intelligence,” in *US Foreign Policy*, M. Cox and D. Stokes (eds) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Alexis de Tocqueville, quoted in *ibid.*, 113; James Madison, “Letter to Thomas Jefferson,” 1798, [http://www.constitution.org/jm/17980513\\_tj.htm](http://www.constitution.org/jm/17980513_tj.htm); Michael, “Executive, Congress, Intelligence”. The argument that democracies experience disadvantages in conducting foreign policy is also expressed by the works of notable realists such as Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, Walter Lippmann, and Henry Kissinger; Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Jackson and Soerensen, *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*, 223; “Foreign Policy Analysis,” accessed January 12, 2009, <http://foreignpolicyanalysis.org/index.html>; For a general description of the process of policy-making refer to Thomas A. Birkland, *An Introduction to the Policy Process: Theories, Concepts, and Models of Public Policy Making* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2011); Larry N. Gerston, *Public Policy Making: Process and Principles* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2010); On the role of bureaucratic and organizational politics see Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Addison-Wesley Press, 1999); Chester Barnard, *The Functions of the Executive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938); Morton Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1974); Henry Kissinger, “Conditions of World Order,” *Daedalus* 95, no. 2 (Spring 1960): 503–29; James G. March and Herbert Simon, *Organizations* (New York: Wiley, 1958); Herbert Simon, *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organization* (New York: Macmillan, 1957).

states' behavior in detail or in all cases. Similarly, Alexander Wendt, one of the core social constructivists in IR, writes: "theories of international politics are distinguished from those that have as their object explaining the behavior of individual states, or 'theories of foreign policy' [...] Like Waltz, I am interested in international politics, not foreign policy." Other authors, such as Colin Elman and Hans Mouritzen, reject the previous perspective and suggest that despite some difficulties IR theories should still be used to devise and test theories of foreign policy.<sup>27</sup>

At present, a large number of theories deals with the subject of foreign policy. These different theories are generally classified into two broad categories that, using the language associated with Prussian historian Leopold von Ranke, we call theories of *Aussenpolitik* and theories of *Innenpolitik*.<sup>28</sup> The first category acknowledges the primacy of systemic factors (i.e. the distribution of relative material power<sup>29</sup> among states) in influencing their foreign policy, and it includes diverse brands of Realism, such as Offensive Realism, Defensive Realism, and Neoclassical Realism.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, "International Politics Is Not Foreign Policy," *Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (Autumn 1996): 54–57; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 11; For a detailed description of this debate see also Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 137–68; Colin Elman, "Horses for Courses: Why Not Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?," *Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (1996): 7–53; Stanley Hoffmann, "An American Social Science: International Relations," *Daedalus* 106, no. 1 (Summer 1977): 41–60; Hans Mouritzen, "Kenneth Waltz: A Critical Rationalist between International Politics and Foreign Policy," in *The Future of International Relations: Masters in the Making?*, O. Weaver and I. Neumann (eds) (New York: Routledge, 1997); Robert Powell, "Anarchy in International Relations Theory: The Neorealist-Neoliberal Debate," *International Organization* 48, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 313–44; Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Press, 1979); Fareed Zakaria, "Realism and Domestic Politics: A Review Essay," *International Security* 17, no. 1 (Summer 1992): 177–98.

<sup>28</sup> Leopold von Ranke, *A Dialogue on Politics*, reprinted in Theodore H. von Laue, "Leopold Ranke: The Formative Years" (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950); An alternative classification of the different theories of foreign policy is offered in Walter Carlsnaes, "Foreign Policy," in *Handbook of International Relations*, W. Carlsnaes, T. Risse, and B. Simmons (eds) (London: Sage Publications, 2002). In his work Carlsnaes distinguishes four "rock-bottom perspectives" in the study of foreign policy: the structural, the social-institutional, the agency-based, and the interpretative actor ones.

<sup>29</sup> From Athenian historian Thucydides to the present day, discussions on politics have been dealing with the definition of power. Nevertheless, general agreement has not been reached yet. Kenneth Waltz concedes this when he writes that the "proper definition [of power] remains a matter of controversy. See: Kenneth N. Waltz, "Reflections on Theory of International Politics: A Response to My Critics," in *Neorealism and Its Critics*, R. O. Keohane (ed) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 333; Some scholars use a "material/resource" definition of power that stresses the importance of such factors as military and economic capabilities, natural resources, territory, and population in determining one country's "power". See on this: Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978); Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; An alternative definition of power is the "relational" one. Supporters of this definition conceive power as a relationship between an actor A and an actor B where A's behavior causes, at least partially, a change in B's behavior. Behavior is defined in broad terms to include, among others, opinions, beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and expectations. For works espousing this view see: David A. Baldwin, "Power and International Relations," in *Handbook of International Relations*, W. Carlsnaes, T. Risse, and B. Simmons (eds) (London: Sage Publications, 2002); Robert Dahl, "The Concept of Power," *Behavioral Science* 2, no. 3 (July 1957).

<sup>30</sup> Proponents of Offensive (or Aggressive) Realism include Eric J. Labs, "Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims," *Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (Summer 1997): 1–49; John Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," in *The Perils of Anarchy: Contemporary Realism and International Security*,

Juxtaposed against this first category we find the theories of *Innenpolitik* that reverse the previous assumption and affirm the primacy of domestic factors in foreign policy. Despite the general agreement on the primacy of domestic factors, these unit-level theories vary in identifying the specific domestic factor or set of factors that best accounts for a state's foreign policy. Some domestic factors commonly used as *explanans* of foreign policy are: leaders' psychology, ideology, culture, form of government, partisan politics, and socioeconomic structure.<sup>31</sup>

This research is not interested in promoting a specific foreign policy theory but, rather, it takes advantage of the many valuable insights of FPA-style theories. Academic Valerie Hudson identifies the principal characteristics, or hallmarks as she calls them, of Foreign Policy Analysis. According to Hudson, FPA is multi-factorial, multi-level, interdisciplinary, integrative, agent-oriented, and actor-specific. We consistently use such characteristics as general guidelines to carry out our analysis on US foreign policy.<sup>32</sup>

Accordingly, in explaining a particular foreign policy we do not rely on a single variable but, rather, on a number of variables (multi-factorial). Moreover, we consider variables from more than one level of analysis (multi-level). All three of Kenneth Waltz's images (the individual, the state, and the international system) participate, in one way or another, in shaping foreign policy. Depending on the case under study, variables at a specific level may gain preeminence in defining the foreign policy outcome. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish a hierarchy among such

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M. Brown, S. Lynn-Jones, and S. Miller (eds) (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995); Works which support Defense Realism are Jack S. Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motive for War," *World Politics* 40, no. 1 (October 1987): 82–107; Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Stephen Van Evera, "Why Cooperation Failed in 1914," *World Politics* 38, no. 1 (October 1985): 80–118; Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); On Neoclassical Realism see: Steven E. Lobell, Norin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Gideon Rose, "Review: Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (October 1998): 144–72; Randall L. Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security* 29, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 159–201; Zakaria, "Realism and Domestic Politics: A Review Essay."

<sup>31</sup> Notable works which espouse the importance of domestic factors in foreign policy include Matthew Evangelista, "Domestic Structures and International Change," in *New Thinking in International Relations Theory*, M. Doyle and J. Ikenberry (eds) (Boulder: Westview, 1997); Joe D. Hagan, "Domestic Political Explanations in the Analysis of Foreign Policy," in *Foreign Policy Analysis: Continuity and Change in Its Second Generation*, L. Neack, J. A. K. Hey and P. J. Haney (eds) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1995); John A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1902); Eckart Kehr, *Economic Interest, Militarism, and Foreign Policy: Essays on German History*, translated by G. Heinz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Vladimir I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (New York: International Publishers, 1916); Jack S. Levy, "Domestic Politics and War," in *The Origins and Prevention of Major Wars*, R. Rotberg and T. Rabb (eds) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (Autumn 1997): 513–53; Richard Rosecrance and Arthur A. Stein, eds., *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); David Skidmore and Valerie M. Hudson, eds., *The Limits of State Autonomy: Societal Groups and Foreign Policy Formulation* (Boulder: Westview, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis*.



variables that would be able to account for all foreign policies at all times and in all cases.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, we also try to integrate teachings from a variety of disciplines including history, sociology, economics, psychology, anthropology, and so forth in our explanations of distinct foreign policies (integrative and interdisciplinary). Finally, we maintain that human agency deserves particular attention in our analysis (agent-oriented) and that national policymakers are not completely interchangeable with one another (actor-specific).<sup>34</sup>

The last two characteristics of foreign policy, those of being agent-oriented and actor-specific, assume special relevance in light of the stated objective of this research: to study whether the US foreign policy under the new leadership of President Barack Obama represented a paradigm shift in the traditional US foreign policy toward the Muslim world, and particularly toward the region of the Greater Middle East. Human agency and actor specificity, in fact, have the potential to be essential drivers of change and diversity in foreign policy.

To state that human agency is essential means that flesh and blood national leaders bearers of new ideas, and not abstract structures, may be major sources of change in foreign policy. As maintained by scholars Valerie Hudson and Christopher Vore, “human beings, acting individually or in collectivities, are the source of much behavior and most change in international politics.” Likewise, academic Charles Kegley writes, “in theorizing about the sources of foreign policy behavior, we should begin with individuals, because only persons think, prefer and act.” Several other authors interested in foreign policy change also acknowledge the important role played by human agents and their ideas in accounting for variability in a state’s external behavior.<sup>35</sup>

In addition, to emphasize actor-specificity<sup>36</sup> implies the refusal to black-box the actors under analysis. Actor-general approaches, that is approaches which assume that national policymakers are completely interchangeable, face difficulties when trying to explain what academics Benjamin Most and Harvey Starr call “foreign policy substitutability” and “domain specific laws”; that is,

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<sup>33</sup> The extreme difficulty of reaching consensus on this issue is showed by the enormous amount of literature and the seemingly endless debate generated by supporters of the primacy of systemic factors and supporters of the primacy of domestic ones. For references see footnotes 28 and 29 in this chapter.

<sup>34</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

<sup>35</sup> Valerie M. Hudson and Christopher S. Vore, “Foreign Policy Analysis Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” *Mershon International Studies Review* 39, no. 2 (October 1995): 209; Charles W. Kegley, “Decision Regimes and the Comparative Study of Foreign Policy,” in *New Directions in the Study of Foreign Policy*, C.F. Hermann, C.W. Kegley, and J.N. Rosenau (eds) (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987), 249; Walter Carlsnaes, “On Analysing the Dynamics of Foreign Policy Change: A Critique and Reconceptualization,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 28, no. 1 (1993): 5–30; Kjell Goldmann, *Change and Stability in Foreign Policy: The Problems and Possibilities of Détente* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988); Charles F. Hermann, “Changing Course: When Governments Choose to Redirect Foreign Policy,” *International Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (March 1990): 3–21.

<sup>36</sup> The term “actor-specific” was coined by Alexander L. George in his work *Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice* (Washington DC: US Institute for Peace, 1993).

respectively, why under similar material and structural conditions we can assist to variability in the resulting foreign policy decisions, and why, conversely, under dissimilar material and structural conditions we can expect similarity in the resulting foreign policy decisions. Actor-specific approaches can provide an answer to these questions: in the absence of material or structural change, diversity in foreign policy may be still possible to explain through the presence of national leaders with different personalities, policy preferences, and priorities.<sup>37</sup>

The utility of these guidelines in our study notwithstanding, we are aware that the discipline of Foreign Policy Analysis has not been exempt from criticism. As this research is not intended to be a justification for the value of FPA and as the following criticisms continue to be debated in detail in the works of other academics, we are only going to briefly mention some of the most common.<sup>38</sup>

Since its inception, critics of FPA have highlighted the hardness of the task of accounting for all the influences on a given foreign policy decision.<sup>39</sup>

In the words of scholar Herbert McClosky,

*“the inordinate complexity of [FPA] as it has so far been outlined is unquestionably its greatest shortcoming, one which in the end may [editor’s note] prove its undoing [...] A research design that requires an investigator [...] to account for a decision making event virtually in its totality –places a backbreaking burden upon him, one that he could never adequately accomplish.”*<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Hudson and Vore, “Foreign Policy Analysis Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow”; Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis*; Benjamin Most and Harvey Starr, “International Relations Theory, Foreign Policy Substitutability, and ‘Nice’ Laws,” *World Politics* 36, no. 3 (April 1984): 383–406; Benjamin Most and Harvey Starr, *Inquiry, Logic, and International Politics* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989); Glenn Palmer and Archana Bhandari, “The Investigation of Substitutability in Foreign Policy,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44, no. 1 (February 2000): 3–10.

<sup>38</sup> The following criticisms and the debate on the relevance of Foreign Policy Analysis as a discipline are analyzed, among others, in the works of Chris Brown, *Understanding International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1997); Jean A. Garrison, ed., “Foreign Policy Analysis in 20/20: A Symposium,” *International Studies Review* 5, no. 2 (June 2003): 155–202; Hudson and Vore, “Foreign Policy Analysis Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow”; Margot Light, “Foreign Policy Analysis,” in *Contemporary International Relations: A Guide to Theory*, A. J. R. Groom and M. Light (eds) (London: Pinter, 1994); Laura Neack, Jeanne A. K. Hey, and Haney Patrick J., eds., *Foreign Policy Analysis: Continuity and Change in Its Second Generation* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1995); Brian White, “The European Challenge to Foreign Policy Analysis,” *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 1 (1999): 37–66.

<sup>39</sup> The origins of Foreign Policy Analysis are generally identified with the publication of three paradigmatic works during the first two decades after the end of the Second World War. These paradigmatic works are: James N. Rosenau, “Pre-Theories and Theories of Foreign Policy,” in *Approaches in Comparative and International Politics*, R. B. Farrell (ed) (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966); Richard C. Snyder, Henry W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin, *Decision Making as an Approach to the Study of International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954); Harold Sprout and Margaret Sprout, *Man-Milieu Relationship Hypotheses in the Context of International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956).

<sup>40</sup> Herbert McClosky, “Concerning Strategies for a Science of International Politics,” in *Foreign Policy Decision Making*, R. Snyder, H. W. Bruck, and B. Sapin (eds) (New York: Free Press, 1962), 201.

McClosky is probably right when he says that explaining a decision making event *in its totality* is a *backbreaking* task but this is not the reason why we use FPA in this research. Here, we apply FPA as a guide to detect and analyze the most relevant, and not all, variables that account for a specific foreign policy decision. Moreover, most of the time, decisions taken by human beings are the result of the influence of multiple variables. Does McClosky criticism imply that we should give up studying human decisions and, consequently, human politics altogether?

Another commonly mentioned critique is that Foreign Policy Analysis has failed so far to produce a coherent grand theory of foreign policy. However, is the lack of a grand theory in FPA really a flaw? Scholar Robert Kelley states that generalization unavoidably leads “to a blurring of complexities, to a flattening of what on a closer examination is clearly quite an irregular terrain.” Other authors have also correctly pointed out that a profound skepticism about the ability of such grand theories to explain foreign policy decisions motivated the development of FPA in the first place and argued that FPA-style middle-range theories have better chances in accounting for very specific trends, events, and policies.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, after the end of the Cold War, other critics have argued that changes in the international system made the field of Foreign Policy Analysis less relevant. In one of his works, academic Christopher Hill summarizes this critique as follows: “as the concepts of state sovereignty and independence have come under attack in recent decades, so the idea that a government might have a discrete set of actions (let alone strategies) for dealing with the outside world has come to seem anachronistic, even naïve.” Similarly, scholar Margot Light concedes that in the post-Cold War world “there is a steady erosion of a separate concept of foreign policy and a consequent undermining of FPA as a discrete field of investigation.” Such critics hold that interdependence, globalization, the spread of international and regional organizations, and the increasing domestic effects of international affairs have challenged the very nature of the state and its ability to devise a distinct set of policies to deal with the external world. They argue, therefore, that Foreign Policy Analysis should be either included in or replaced by other disciplines to understanding and explaining a state’s external behavior.<sup>42</sup>

Hill himself offers an answer to this last critique:

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Kelley, “Ideology and Political Culture from Jefferson to Nixon,” *The American Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (June 1977): 553; Juliet Kaarbo, “Foreign Policy Analysis in the Twenty-First Century: Back to Comparison, Forward to Identity and Ideas,” *International Studies Review* 5, no. 2 (June 2003): 156–63; Steve Smith, “Theories of Foreign Policy: An Historical Overview,” *Review of International Studies* 12, no. 1 (1986): 13–29.

<sup>42</sup> Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy*, 1; Light, “Foreign Policy Analysis,” 100.

*“until ‘global governance’ crystallized into something solid and coherent, with international institutions taking genuine responsibility for the welfare of a real world society, citizens and politicians alike will continue to wrestle with the dilemmas arising from the existence of foreignness, in varying ways and to varying degrees.”<sup>43</sup>*

In other words, although the above mentioned changes in the international system have had some tangible effects on the nature of the state and its foreign policy, states remain primary actors in world politics and continuities in the factors influencing decisions on their external behavior persist.

All that considered, we still regard Foreign Policy Analysis as a relevant field of research that can provide practical guidance and useful insights to analysts interested in studying a state’s foreign policy.

### **Structure and Methodology**

This research is primarily a study about change or the absence of it. In particular, our focus is on President Barack Obama’s pledge to reorient the foreign policy of the United States in the region of the Greater Middle East. In order to assess if the first-term foreign policy of President Obama displayed continuity or change compared to that of previous US administrations, this work is structured in four distinct parts.

In Part One (Introduction), we have pointed out the primary goal of our research and explained the reasons why the topic is deemed critical for the advancement of the US national interest. This has been followed by an account of the theoretical background that provided most of the analytical tools applied throughout the research. Special emphasis has been given to the role of human agency and actor specificity as possible drivers of change in foreign policy. Part One ends with a description of the structure of the research and the methodology used in it.

Part Two (US Foreign Policy) offers, across two chapters, a detailed study of the fundamental components of US foreign policy broadly defined: its public rhetoric and its practice. This critical assessment is necessary for methodological reasons: in order to properly assess the transformative impact of President Obama on US foreign policy toward the Greater Middle East, we need to analyze the main features and dynamics that have traditionally characterized such a foreign policy.

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<sup>43</sup> Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy*, xviii.

As far as rhetoric is concerned, in Chapter One, we argue that US public rhetoric is grounded in a distinct and time-honored idea of national exceptionalism. Exceptionalism, in turn, provides the main themes that form a specific foreign policy narrative, namely the myth of US innocence. Innocence in foreign policy means that the United States intervenes internationally always in reaction to external threats or events, it is constantly committed to just causes, and it acts invariably with good intentions and for the noblest purposes.

In Chapter Two, we examine US foreign policy practice. We first discuss the main actors and dynamics that qualify the process of foreign policymaking in the United States. Then, we analyze the essential concept of the national interest and identify the three principal clusters of interests (realist, socio-economic, and ideal) that constitute it. Finally, we offer a historical overview of the four core US strategic interests that have distinguished US Middle East policy since the end of World War II: access to Middle Eastern energy resources, containment of hostile powers, policies to counter terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the special relationship with Israel.

Chapter Two's historical overview of US Middle East policy provides empirical evidence of the tensions existing between different US national interests in the Greater Middle East. It also shows that, when ideal interests have clashed with socio-economic and/or realist interests, US foreign policy has generally experienced a profound disconnect between its public rhetoric and the actual policies implemented on the ground.

Although this research strictly focuses on US relations with the Greater Middle East, it is worth noting that the disconnect between rhetoric and practice in US foreign policy is a phenomenon that goes beyond this specific geographical region. Indeed, this phenomenon can be detected in US relations with other areas of the world. For example in US relations with Central America, with the powerful case of the US foreign policy toward Cuba after the Spanish-American War in 1898 and in US relations with East Asia, with the telling case of US support for the regime of South Vietnam after the French disengaged from the country in 1954.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, such a disconnect between public rhetoric and practice is not limited to the realm of foreign policy. For instance, in US trade policy, frictions exist between the promotion of free and open markets abroad and protectionist measures at home (i.e. US national subsidies to agriculture).

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<sup>44</sup> See Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback, Second Edition: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2004); Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2006).

Or in US environmental policy, where there are tensions between general calls to defend the environment and the practical needs of economic growth (i.e. the United States signed but refused to ratify the 1997 Kyoto Protocol).

In Part Three (The Arab Awakening), we shift the focus of our research from the general to the specific; from the analysis of US Middle East policy broadly defined to the study of US Middle East policy during the first term of Barack Obama's presidency. In particular, Part Three applies the Arab Awakening, that is the wave of popular uprisings that broke out across the Greater Middle East in 2011, as a test to evaluate the Obama administration's record in setting a new beginning in US-Muslim relations; one, according to the US president's own statements, based on mutual interest and mutual respect. Across five chapters, we provide a detailed analysis of the uprisings that occurred in five Muslim-majority countries (Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and Syria) and of the way the US administration responded to them. The selection of these specific countries depended on a number of criteria. First, we considered only "core" Arab Awakening countries, that is countries where popular protests reached an intensity and had a duration that seriously threatened the hold on power of the existing regimes. This is the reason why we decided not to discuss minor protests that took place in Algeria, Jordan, Turkey, Oman, and other Muslim countries. Second, we selected only countries where the United States had relevant stakes in the survival of the regime and where US involvement in the uprising was significant. This is why Tunisia does not show in the research. In fact, although unrest in the country ostensibly triggered protests and revolts in all the others, US stakes and involvement in the Tunisian uprising were almost negligible. Finally, the combined analysis of the five selected countries has a particularly effective explanatory power. It offers the full-range of variations in the dependent variable under analysis (aka the Obama administration's response to the Awakening): support for the regime, support for the opposition, and shifting position over time.

A thorough discussion of the research's main findings is the subject of Part Four (Findings and Implications). These findings are used to give an answer to our main research question: "To what extent did President Obama's foreign policy represent a paradigm shift in the traditional US foreign policy toward the Muslim world, and especially toward the region of the Greater Middle East?" Part Four concludes with an overview of the implications, as of the end of 2014, of the Arab Awakening for core US strategic and ideal interests in the Greater Middle East.

As for methodology, this research applies what in social sciences is commonly labeled as the Comparative Method of analysis, that is a systematic analysis of a small number of cases in a comparative fashion. In particular, we carry out a comparative analysis of the Obama

administration's response to popular uprisings in five Muslim-majority countries (Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, and Syria). Each country-study is structured as follows:

- identification of the most relevant US national interests in the country,
- description of the US foreign policy toward the country before the outbreak of the Arab Awakening,
- analysis of the uprising and of the Obama administration's response,
- assessment of continuity or change represented by the policy of the Obama administration compared to previous US foreign policies toward the specific country under analysis.

In each country-study, we also consistently discuss the sometimes conflicting perspectives held by the US institutional actors that we consider to be most directly and frequently involved in the US process of foreign policymaking. These actors include: the White House, the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and the Congress. As for the timeframe of the research, our analysis focuses specifically on the events that occurred from 2011 to 2012 (the "core" years of the Arab Awakening).

Given that the analysis of a small number of cases particularly suits a qualitative method of research, in this study we decided to rely on a qualitative approach instead of a quantitative one. Such an approach mainly consisted of one-to-one interviews conducted face to face or over the phone/internet. The interviews were discussions around certain concepts or ideas with open questioning. Interviewees were encouraged to explain or describe their reasons for having certain responses and opinions. The primary purpose of these interviews was twofold: to obtain valuable insights into the foreign policy debate occurring in the United States during the Arab Awakening and to shed light on the sometimes confused dynamics of the various 2011 popular uprisings. Moreover, the interviews proved particularly useful to overcome some methodological issues. One issue concerned the recent, and often contemporaneous, nature of the events under analysis that did not allow the researcher to access still classified US government documents. The sample of our interviews helped to address this problem since it included interviewees who either were personally involved in the process of US foreign policymaking or had access to people directly involved in it. A second issue was the ongoing conflict and high-levels of violence characterizing the countries under analysis that constrained the researcher's ability to travel to those countries. Again, our interviews proved especially useful insofar as many of the interviewees personally traveled to the region or/and had extensive networks of informants there. Our sample included government

officials, US foreign policy analysts, and Middle East experts based both in the United States and overseas. Interviewees were affiliated with globally renowned think tanks and institutions such as the US State Department, the Atlantic Council, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Middle East Institute, the Washington Institute for Near East Studies, the Brookings Institution, the Center for National Policy, and the Stimson Center in Washington DC; Chatham House, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and the UK Royal Air Force in London. In agreement with the interviewees, we decided to use the information obtained through these interviews as background information and to avoid direct quotations of the interviewees' comments.

In addition to the personal interviews that we conducted, this research relied on two other major sets of both primary and secondary sources.

Regarding US foreign policy practice, sources consisted of US government files, the works of authoritative historians and academics, reports from human rights organizations, and articles and opinion pieces by foreign policy experts and journalists. Precious insights into the domestic dynamics of the US foreign policy debate during the Obama administration came from public documents released by the White House, the US Department of State, and the US Department of Defense, from transcripts of congressional hearings and testimonies, and from reports compiled by the US Congressional Research Service. In addition to the already-mentioned interviews, the acquisition of information still classified was made possible by the analysis of the work of experts and scholars that had the opportunity to have direct access to primary sources otherwise not yet available to the general public. With regard to the historical sections of Part Two of this research, useful sources of information on the practice of US Middle East policy before Obama took office included the *FRUS* (Foreign Relations of the United States) that is accessible online both through the University of Wisconsin Digital Collection and through the website of the US Department of State; the *Digital National Security Archive* that allows the researcher to have online access to a large amount of digitalized primary documents; and the *National Security Archive*, a project run by George Washington University. Since our main focus was on the recent US response to the Arab Awakening, since the events discussed in our historical sections have been extensively analyzed by reputable scholars, and since we are not aware of the release of any new document that had the potential to substantially alter the findings of such previous analysis, we deemed unnecessary to carry out a thorough study of archival sources. Here, a brief word about sources on the practice of US foreign policy is in order. Since this research, especially Part Three, deals with very recent history and with events whose ultimate outcome is still uncertain, we acknowledge the remote



possibility that, despite our best efforts, some parts of our account of the US response to the Arab Awakening may look different once official records become available.

As for US rhetoric, sources included presidential speeches and remarks, statements by high-ranking administration officials and congressmen, government public files, and a selection of US, European, and Arab news outlets (i.e. *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Al Jazeera*). With regard to the Barack Obama administrations, official speeches, statements, and remarks by US policymakers are all available online on government official websites: the White House, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/>; the Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/>; the Department of Defense, <http://www.defense.gov/>; the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>; the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, <http://www.foreign.senate.gov/>; just to name a few. Previous administrations' rhetoric was acquired in alternative ways. Presidential rhetoric is collected in the Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States. These collections are accessible for consultation at several libraries, as for example at Senate House Library in London. Another way to obtain evidence of past US foreign policy rhetoric is to consult old copies of US newspapers. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* conveniently cover the entire timeframe of our research. Digital copies of such newspapers are accessible through online databases, such as the *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* database. In addition, further evidence of past administrations' rhetoric can be found through the analysis of secondary sources, such as the works of historians, political analysts, and journalists.

Finally, this research looked at the US government documents leaked to the general public in 2010-11 by Wikileaks, a whistle-blowing media organization. We were especially interested in those documents (the so-called Embassy Cables) describing the bilateral relations between the United States and Middle Eastern regimes in the years leading to the outbreak of the Arab Awakening. We used Wikileaks documents aware of their limits. A first problem concerned their representativeness. In fact, before publication, these documents had been filtered at least twice: first, by the Wikileaks organization and then, by the media outlets that received them. Such a process of double filtering may have affected the type of information that was eventually made public. Another problem was that the Embassy Cables mostly offered the perspective of a single department (the US Department of State) and not those of other government institutions such as the US Department of Defense or the White House. Despite these limits, the Wikileaks documents provided us with interesting insights into the nature of US relations with many leaders of the Arab world.

Although primarily intended for scholars and policymakers, this research was developed in order to reach out to an audience as large as possible. Our great hope is to give a personal contribution to the

ongoing debate on such significant issues by providing fresh information and useful insights, for we believe that a better informed public debate will be likely to generate better policy solutions in the future.

## PART TWO

# US FOREIGN POLICY

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## US Foreign Policy Rhetoric

In this chapter we discuss the first fundamental component of the foreign policy of the United States; that is US foreign policy rhetoric. To begin with, we address the important relationship between public rhetoric and foreign policy. After that, we provide a detailed study of the origins, evolution, and defining characteristics specific to US foreign policy rhetoric. Particular attention is paid to the analysis of the idea of US exceptionalism and of its foreign policy spin off: the myth of US innocence.

### Public Rhetoric and Foreign Policy

The term “foreign policy rhetoric” describes the ideas and values, included in public statements and official documents, that characterize the US foreign policy discourse. Skeptics may contend that public rhetoric should not be relied on as evidence to support the genuine intentions behind a country’s foreign policy. They argue that public rhetoric is mostly an instrument in the hands of the elites to deceive public opinion and hide the real reasons for a state’s international behavior.<sup>45</sup>

Although this may be the case at times, this argument does not substantially weaken the utility and importance of analyzing public rhetoric in foreign policy. According to political scientist Michael Hunt, “public rhetoric is not simply a screen tool or ornament. It is also, perhaps even primarily, a form of communication, rich in symbols and mythology and loosely constrained by certain rules.” Hunt explains that “to be effective, public rhetoric must draw on values and concerns widely shared and easily understood by its audience.” In other words, public rhetoric represents the principal means of communication between national leaders and public opinion and, in order to be effective, public rhetoric has to mirror ideas and values deeply cherished by a large majority of the society, including the policymakers themselves. In fact, policymakers are not individuals culturally and ideologically alien to their societies. Assuming as much would create a situation of schizophrenic foreign policy, national in name but not in its fundamental tenets. On the contrary, in taking office, national leaders are most likely to carry their cultural and ideological background with them or, by using the words of XIX century philosopher Herbert Spencer, policymakers are generally “the products of their societies” that give them “their own early bias, their creed, morals, knowledge, aspirations.” More recently Henry Kissinger, a former US secretary of state, writes that “the

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<sup>45</sup> Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2009); Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*.

convictions that leaders have formed before reaching high office are the intellectual capital they will consume as long as they continue in office.” Similarly, in their study on the domestic sources of US foreign policy, academic Eugene Wittkopf and James McCormick maintain that “the basic needs, values, beliefs, and self-images widely shared by Americans [...] stands out as a primary societal source of American foreign policy.” All that considered, national core values and ideas, that find expression in public rhetoric, are likely to influence the way national policymakers and public opinion perceive and respond to international events.<sup>46</sup>

Public rhetoric simultaneously shows both an enabling and a constraining function. On the one hand, a credible rhetoric enables national leaders to rally public support for a particular foreign policy and thus increases their ability to access the country’s power resources.<sup>47</sup> As maintained by academic William Schneider, “foreign policy makers must demonstrate not only that their policies work, but that they [...] express the values of major constituencies in American political life.” On the other hand, public rhetoric constrains national leaders to maintain a certain level of consistency between their words and their actions. Indeed, as we have already pointed out, in order to conjure support, a rhetoric must be credible. A rhetoric that is repeatedly proved pronouncedly inconsistent with the speaker’s real values and ideas will lose credibility in the long run. People will plausibly stop believing in such a rhetoric and will make it harder for policymakers to obtain popular support for their foreign policies.<sup>48</sup>

Another notable function of public rhetoric is that it participates in the construction of a country’s national identity. According to academic Valerie Hudson, “[the] aspects of national identity are not carved in stone, nor do they spring from tablets of stone.” Rather, “discourse and interaction within our society are the engines of national identity.” National leaders’ public statements and government’s official documents, in particular, provide much-needed answers to fundamental

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<sup>46</sup> Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy*, 15; Herbert Spencer, *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative*, Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative. Library Edition, containing Seven Essays not before republished, and various other Additions, vol. 1, 3 vols. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1891), <http://oll.libertyfund.org/simple.php?id=335>; Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 1; a similar argument about the political socialization that national leaders receive in their societies is also made by academic Valerie Hudson in her book *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 103; Wittkopf and McCormick, *The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy*, xvi.

<sup>47</sup> The traditional view on the impact of US public opinion in foreign policy tends to minimize its influence. After the Vietnam War, however, a new perspective acknowledging a more important role of public opinion has begun to gain consensus. For the traditional view see Gabriel Almond, *The American People and Foreign Policy* (New York: Praeger, 1960); Bernard Cohen, *The Public’s Impact on Foreign Policy* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973); Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1922); Works which acknowledge a more important role of US public opinion are Ole R. Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans’ Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Bruce Russett, “Doves, Hawks, and US Public Opinion,” *Political Science Quarterly* 105, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 515–38.

<sup>48</sup> William Schneider, “Public Opinion,” in *The Making of America’s Soviet Policy*, J. Nye (ed) (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1984), 33.

questions for human communities such as “who are we?”, “what is our role in the world?”, and “who are they?”<sup>49</sup>

In addition to influencing national politics and national identities, foreign policy rhetoric has important external effects. It is primarily a form of communication among countries, and between states and other actors on the international stage. As such, foreign policy rhetoric performs its enabling and constraining functions also at the international level. National leaders can use public rhetoric to pursue a number of foreign policy objectives: to send messages to allies, to warn foes, or to gain international support for their policies. However, if rhetoric is not supported by a consistent practice it can become counterproductive and eventually raise charges of hypocrisy and double standards.

Public rhetoric, therefore, is essential to understanding a country’s identity and to explaining significant aspects of its international behavior. This is not to say that public rhetoric is the root cause of foreign policy. What we are arguing here is that public rhetoric reflects important elements of a country’s self-image that, in turn, contribute to shape the discourse in which policymakers deal with foreign policy issues and in which the general public understands those issues.<sup>50</sup>

Moving from this assumption, the next sections provide the reader with a thorough analysis of the predominant brand of US public rhetoric. We address three fundamental questions: What are its origins? Its defining characteristics? And was it challenged throughout US history by alternative brands?

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<sup>49</sup> Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 106.

<sup>50</sup> On the role of ideas and values see Sheri Berman, “Ideas, Norms, and Culture in Political Analysis” (Workshop on Ideas and Culture in Political Analysis, Princeton University, May 1998); Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, “Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War,” *International Security* 25, no. 3 (winter 2001); Geoff Eley, “Nationalism and Social History,” *Social History* 6, no. 1 (1981): 83–107; Clifford Geertz, “Ideology as a Cultural System,” in *Ideology and Discontent*, D. Apter (New York: Free Press, 1964); Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, “Ideas and Foreign Policy: An Analytical Framework,” in *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change*, J. Goldstein and R. Keohane (eds) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Robert Kelley, *The Cultural Pattern in American Politics: The First Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979); Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy*.

## US Exceptionalism

The predominant brand of US public rhetoric draws much of its themes and strength from the idea of US exceptionalism.<sup>51</sup> Many Americans hold an image of their nation as an exceptional one. In the XIX century, French author Alexis de Tocqueville already noted a sense of exceptionality in the Americans' perception of themselves:

*“Not only are the Anglo-Americans united by these common opinions, but they are separated from all other nations by a feeling of pride. For the last fifty years no pains have been spared to convince the inhabitants of the United States that they are the only religious, enlightened, and free people. They perceive that, for the present, their own democratic institutions prosper, while those of other countries fail; hence they conceive a high opinion of their superiority and are not very remote from believing themselves to be a distinct species of mankind.”*<sup>52</sup>

As we show below, Americans who subscribe to the exceptionalist idea believe themselves to be a chosen people with a special mission to reshape the world according to their universal values. This belief is by no means an exclusive feature of the United States. On the contrary, images of national exceptionalism have been a common and recurrent theme throughout human history. For example, French revolutionaries in the XVIII century emphasized the universality of their values in the *Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* (Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen). Moreover, scholar Russel Nye argues that “all nations [...] have long agreed that they are chosen peoples; the idea of special destiny is as old as nationalism itself.” This argument has also been reiterated by professor Anatol Lieven who points out that “a great many nations throughout history –perhaps even the great majority- have had a sense of themselves as especially chosen by God, or destiny, for great and special tasks.” The United States is currently walking the same path walked by the past civilizational empires “of Rome and China to spread their civilizations to the barbarians beyond their borders; of the Spanish to Christianize the New World; of the *missions civilisatrices* of the nineteenth-century European empires; of the Soviet Union to bring the light of Communism to the rest of humanity.” Academic Stephen Walt concurs and writes that “when Americans proclaim they are exceptional and indispensable, they are simply the latest nation to sing a familiar old song. Among great powers, thinking you [a]re special is the norm, not the exception.”

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<sup>51</sup> In this work we do not argue that this particular idea is the only one present in the US public discourse or that all Americans unconditionally subscribe to it. However, we will provide enough evidence to support the argument that a rhetoric grounded on the idea of US exceptionalism holds a dominant and privileged status in the US public discourse.

<sup>52</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, “Book I, Chapter 18,” in *Democracy in America*, 1835, [http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/I\\_ch18.htm](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/I_ch18.htm).

Although not unique in history, the idea of national exceptionalism in the United States is grounded in a number of specific characteristics that taken together distinguish it from the others.<sup>53</sup>

First of all, US exceptionalism has a strong and longstanding religious component. No serious attempt to analyze US public rhetoric can afford to dismiss the importance of religion in the country. As early as in the XVI and XVII centuries, Puritan settlers from England and Scotland identified North America with the “New World”, the “New Israel”, the “New Jerusalem”, or “a religious special place” whose inhabitants were “blessed by God.” On board of the ship *Arabella*, John Winthrop, a devout Puritan and future leader of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, delivered the often-recalled sermon where he stated that “we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.” Moreover, even the founding documents of the United States bear the signs of this religious influence. The 1776 Declaration of Independence is filled with religious references: “Nature’s God”, the “Creator”, “Divine Providence”, and “Supreme Judge of the World.” The First Amendment in the 1791 Bill of Rights regulates the issue of freedom of religion. The US national motto proposed in 1861, during the American Civil War, but not ratified until 1956 under President Dwight Eisenhower, says “in God we trust”. In addition, evidence of the special status enjoyed by religion in the United States includes the success and appeal of public figures such as Billy Graham, an evangelical preacher who during the XX century and up to the beginning of the XXI has had privileged access to almost a dozen of US presidents. Furthermore, religion’s influence is absolutely not a relic of the past. It is still strong in contemporary US society, as showed by a 2011 survey poll. To the question on the importance of religion in their lives, 50 percent of Americans answered that “religion plays a very important role”, compared to 22 percent in Spain, 21 percent in Germany, 17 percent in Britain, and 13 percent in France. A different 2011 survey poll asked Christians in the United States (who represent roughly 75 percent of the entire US population) whether they identified themselves first with their religion or with their nationality. Forty-six percent put their Christian identity first, compared to 23 percent in Germany, 22 percent in Spain, 21 percent in Britain, and 8 percent in France. This is a percentage similar to those found in the societies of Turkey (49 percent) and Egypt (46 percent) with regard to Muslim identity.

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<sup>53</sup> French National Assembly, “Déclaration Des Droits de l’Homme et Du Citoyen,” 1789, <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/Droit-francais/Constitution/Declaration-des-Droits-de-l-Homme-et-du-Citoyen-de-1789>; Russel B. Nye, *This Almost Chosen People: Essays in The History of American Ideas* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1966); quoted in William Cobb, *The American Foundation Myth in Vietnam* (New York: University Press of America, 1998), 4; Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 33; Anatol Lieven, “The Future of US Foreign Policy,” in *US Foreign Policy, M. Cox and D. Stokes (eds)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 435; Stephen M. Walt, “The Myth of American Exceptionalism,” *Foreign Policy*, November 2011, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/the\\_myth\\_of\\_american\\_exceptionalism?page=full](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/the_myth_of_american_exceptionalism?page=full).



Although not equally distributed throughout the United States, religion is undoubtedly a major political force in the Greater South and parts of the Midwest.<sup>54</sup>

The second specific characteristic of US exceptionalism consists in a similarly potent and time-honored secular component. Its origins can be traced back to the Age of Enlightenment or even further back to the British tradition under the Tudors. It draws extensively on the liberal philosophy of John Locke and on the political economy of Adam Smith. Although largely imported from Europe, this secular component of US exceptionalism grew in the United States within a different environment, free from the constraints of the secular hierarchy of the crown and the religious hierarchy of the church. The secular component is often referred to as the American Creed, a term coined in the 1940s by the Swedish Nobel Prize laureate Gunnar Myrdal. The American Creed grants an exceptional status to the concept of freedom. It also includes both political and economic aspects, the former more widely accepted than the latter. Regarding its political aspect, the Creed is generally praised for its support for liberal, democratic, individualistic, and egalitarian values. As far as egalitarian values are concerned, in order to understand US society, it is critical to remember that these values refer specifically to political and cultural, not economic, egalitarianism. Regarding its economic aspect, instead, the Creed is often associated with the concepts of free trade, capitalist economy, and frontier mentality.<sup>55</sup>

The political and economic nature of the Creed is thoroughly examined in a study by academics Herbert McClosky and John Zaller. In *The American Ethos*, they show that the national image of the United States is grounded both in a strong faith in democratic values, and a firm belief in capitalism and the free market. The major elements of the Creed are succinctly summarized by

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<sup>54</sup> Tami R. Davis and Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Citty Upon a Hill," *Foreign Policy* 66 (Spring 1987): 20–38; Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952); Michael B. Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008); John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," 1630, <http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html>; US Congress, "US Declaration of Independence," 1776, [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html); Pew Global Attitudes Project, *The American-Western European Values Gap*, November 17, 2011, <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2011/11/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Values-Report-FINAL-November-17-2011-10AM-EST.pdf>; Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Muslim-Western Tensions Persist*, July 21, 2011, <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2011/07/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Muslim-Western-Relations-FINAL-FOR-PRINT-July-21-2011.pdf>; Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong*, viii.

<sup>55</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, Thomas Hollis (London: A. Millar et al., 1764), [http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com\\_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=222](http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=222); Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations by Adam Smith, Edited with an Introduction, Notes, Marginal Summary and an Enlarged Index by Edwin Cannan* (London: Methuen, 1904); Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1944); Samuel P. Huntington, "American Ideals versus American Institutions," *Political Science Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 1–37; Judith Goldstein, "Ideas, Institutions, and American Trade Policy," *International Organization* 42, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 179–217; Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1955); Paul E. Rohrlach, "Economic Culture and Foreign Policy: The Cognitive Analysis of Economic Policy Making," *International Organization* 41, no. 1 (winter 1987): 61–92.

scholars Daniel Deudney and Jeffrey Meiser: “individual freedom and institutionalized civil rights, popular sovereignty, limited government specified in a constitution, multiparty electoral democracy, private property and market capitalism, rule of law and independent courts, and religious liberty and separation of church and state.” These principles are inscribed in all the founding documents of the United States, including the Declaration of Independence, the Federal Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and single states’ Constitutions. According to foreign policy expert Walter Russell Mead, “many Americans, perhaps most” consider such founding documents “to be something like sacred scripture: revelations of eternal principles, valid for all time.” Examples of the secular component of US exceptionalism date back to as early as the XVIII century when author Thomas Paine worded the United States’ special mission to reshape the world in the following way: “we [Americans] have in our power to begin the world all over again.”<sup>56</sup>

Universalism is the third characteristic of US exceptionalism. It maintains that American principles have universal value and are universally applicable. There are many examples of this in US public rhetoric. For example, in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson, while addressing the US Senate, stated that “these are American principles, American policies. We could stand for no others. And they are also the principles and policies of forward-looking men and women everywhere, of every modern nation, of every enlightened community. They are the principles of mankind and must prevail.” The American belief in the universality of US principles was as true in the past as it is now. In fact, almost a century later, in strikingly similar language, President George W. Bush made the same point in his administration’s 2002 National Security Strategy document, “these values of freedom are right and true for every person, in every society -and the duty of protecting these values against their enemies is the common-calling of freedom-loving people across the globe and across the ages.” Given that, we can confidently argue that universalism is another longstanding and essential component of US exceptionalism.<sup>57</sup>

Fourth, the American self-image of being a chosen people with a special mission to reshape the world is peculiar for its persistence and resilience throughout US history. Historian Michael Kammen describes the “recurrent rhetoric” about US exceptionalism as “a cultural reality and a

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<sup>56</sup> Herbert McClosky and John Zaller, *The American Ethos: Public Attitudes Toward Democracy and Capitalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); Daniel Deudney and Jeffrey Meiser, “American Exceptionalism,” in *US Foreign Policy, M. Cox and D. Stokes (eds)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 29; Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 57; Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, 1776, <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=PaiComm.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=all>.

<sup>57</sup> Woodrow Wilson, “Address to the US Senate 1917,” January 22, 1917, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65396>; George W. Bush, “The National Security Strategy of the United States 2002,” September 17, 2002, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002>.

potent force.” The validity of the idea of national exceptionalism has been sometimes doubted. Particularly, criticism mounted in the mid-1970s when the Watergate scandal and the failure in Vietnam shook Americans’ belief in their country’s exceptionality.<sup>58</sup> However, despite the criticisms it has received, we believe that US exceptionalism has remained a constant of US public discourse. Indeed, a quick analysis of the US foreign policy rhetoric of the last two hundred and fifty years highlights the existence of a *leitmotif* that runs from the colonial period up to the present day.<sup>59</sup>

Drawing on the words of Winthrop and Paine, successive presidents and top-ranking officials have been reiterating the same themes and the same values time and again. President John Adams in 1797 spoke about a people blessed by God, “may that Being who is supreme over all, the Patron of Order, the Fountain of Justice, and the Protector in all ages of the world of virtuous liberty, continue His blessing upon this nation and its Government and give it all possible success and duration consistent with the ends of His providence.” Amidst the sorrow of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln dubbed the United States “the last best hope of earth.”<sup>60</sup>

Almost two generations later, President Woodrow Wilson stressed US exceptionality and his country’s leading role in the world as follows:

*“there can be no question of our ceasing to be a major power. The only question is whether we can refuse the moral leadership that it is offered us [...] The stage is set, the destiny is disclosed. It has come about by no plan of our conceiving, but by the hand of God who led us into this way [...] It was of this what we dreamed at our birth. America shall in truth show the way.”*<sup>61</sup>

At the outset of the Cold War, President Harry Truman, while comparing the US system with the Soviet one, stated that:

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<sup>58</sup> An overview of the literature which criticizes the idea of US exceptionalism is provided by Michael Kammen, “The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration,” *American Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (March 1993): 1–43; Interesting critiques also include Daniel Bell, “The End of American Exceptionalism,” *The Public Interest* 41 (Fall 1975): 193–224; Laurence Veysey, “The Autonomy of American History Reconsidered,” *American Quarterly* 31 (Fall 1979): 455–77.

<sup>59</sup> Kammen, “The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration,” 11; The argument that exceptionalism is a fundamental element of US cultural capital and national identity is also made by Seymour M. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: Norton, 1996); Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 1998).

<sup>60</sup> John Adams, “Inaugural Address 1797,” March 4, 1797, [http://www.Presidentialrhetoric.com/historicspeeches/adams/first\\_inaugural.html](http://www.Presidentialrhetoric.com/historicspeeches/adams/first_inaugural.html); Abraham Lincoln, “State of the Union Address 1862,” December 1, 1862, <http://www.Presidentialrhetoric.com/historicspeeches/lincoln/stateoftheunion1862.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Woodrow Wilson, “Address to the US Senate 1919,” July 10, 1919, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4979>.

*“one way of life [the American one] is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression [...] The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms. If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world.”*<sup>62</sup>

In a 1969 address to the nation, President Richard Nixon declared that “we have become the strongest, richest nation in the world. And the wheel of destiny has turned so that any hope for the survival of peace and freedom will be determined by whether the American people have the moral stamina and the courage to meet the challenge of free world leadership.” During his inaugural address, President Jimmy Carter sounded a similar theme, “the passion for freedom is on the rise. Tapping this new spirit, there can be no nobler nor more ambitious task for America to undertake on this day of a new beginning than to help shape a just and peaceful world that is truly humane.” After the demise of the USSR in 1990, President George H.W. Bush envisioned an opportunity for his country to reshape the world, “out of these troubled times [...] -a new world order- can emerge.” At the beginning of the XXI century, future National Security Adviser and then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice expressed a common and widely accepted belief when she affirmed that “the United States and its allies are on the right side of history.” More recently, two eminent US senators confirmed the persistent popularity of the theme of US exceptionalism. In 2012, at the Republican National Convention, Senator John McCain explained that the United States has “led with generous hearts, moved by an abiding love of justice, to help others eradicate disease, lift themselves from poverty, live under laws of their own making, and determine their own destinies [...] This is what makes America an exceptional nation.” Similarly, in 2013, Senator Rand Paul wrote on the columns of *Time Magazine*: “America is indeed exceptional. Our history has proved it so. While we all share the same Creator, we do not all share the same richness of history regarding human rights, freedom and democracy. There has been in the past 200 years a city on the hill that has showed brighter than all others.” This brief historical overview illustrates that the idea of US exceptionalism has been a consistent and recurrent theme in the US public discourse throughout the centuries up to current times.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Harry Truman, “The Truman Doctrine Speech,” March 12, 1947, <http://www.Presidentialrhetoric.com/historicspeeches/truman/trumandocctrine.html>.

<sup>63</sup> Richard Nixon, “The Silent Majority Speech,” November 3, 1969, <http://watergate.info/nixon/silent-majority-speech-1969.shtml>; Jimmy Carter, “Inaugural Address 1977,” January 20, 1977, <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/speeches/inaugadd.phtml>; George H.W. Bush, “The Iraqi Aggression in the Persian Gulf Speech,” September 11, 1990, <http://www.Presidentialrhetoric.com/historicspeeches/bush/iraqiaggression.html>; Condoleezza Rice, “Promoting the

A fifth specific characteristic of US exceptionalism is that it has enjoyed a widespread political consensus. A consensus that is indeed bipartisan. According to some observers, political confrontation between Republicans and Democrats over issues of foreign policy consists of no more than political theater: “lost amidst the posturing is the extent to which both parties and virtually the entire foreign policy elite tacitly share a common vision.” Confrontation is often a matter of different priorities and tactics rather than disagreement on fundamental principles. The previous examples have already showed that the rhetoric of US exceptionalism has been widely used both by Republicans, such as Nixon, H.W. Bush, and W. Bush, and by Democrats, such as Wilson, Truman, and Carter. A couple of additional examples from history will help demonstrate the bipartisan nature of this consensus on the core themes and values of US foreign policy rhetoric. Democratic President John Kennedy revived the theme of the “city upon a hill” by stating, “today the eyes of all people are truly upon us -and our governments, in every branch, at every level, national, state and local, must be as a city upon a hill- constructed and inhabited by men aware of their great trust and their great responsibilities.” Similarly, Republican President Ronald Reagan stated: “I’ve spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don’t know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace.” During the George H.W. Bush Republican administration, National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft said that the United States was “the indispensable ingredient in fashioning a stable world order [...] We do not have the luxury of putting our leadership on hold until we get our domestic house in order. Unfortunately, there is no holiday from history.” In striking the same chord about US exceptionality, a Democrat, Madeleine Albright, secretary of state under President Bill Clinton, declared that “If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future” and “we have our own duty to be authors of history.” This evidence of manifest bipartisanship adds value to the argument that the US self-image of national exceptionalism has enjoyed extremely widespread political consensus.<sup>64</sup>

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National Interest,” *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 1 (February 2000): 46; John McCain, “Transcript of John McCain’s Speech at the RNC” (Fox News, August 29, 2012), <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/08/29/transcript-john-mccain-speech-at-rnc/>; Rand Paul, “Sen. Rand Paul: President Putin, America Is Exceptional,” *Time Magazine*, September 13, 2013, <http://ideas.time.com/2013/09/13/sen-rand-paul-president-putin-america-is-exceptional/>.

<sup>64</sup> Andrew Bacevich, *American Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 9; John Kennedy, “Address to a Joint Convention of the General Court of The Commonwealth of Massachusetts,” January 9, 1961, [http://www.mass.gov/?pageID=mg2modulechunk&L=6&L0=Home&L1=State+Government&L2=About+Massachusetts&L3=Interactive+State+House&L4=Key+Events&L5=Enduring+Era%3A+The+Spirit+of+the+JFK+Presidency&sid=massgov2&b=terminalcontent&f=interactive\\_statehouse\\_jfk\\_speech&csid=massgov2](http://www.mass.gov/?pageID=mg2modulechunk&L=6&L0=Home&L1=State+Government&L2=About+Massachusetts&L3=Interactive+State+House&L4=Key+Events&L5=Enduring+Era%3A+The+Spirit+of+the+JFK+Presidency&sid=massgov2&b=terminalcontent&f=interactive_statehouse_jfk_speech&csid=massgov2); Ronald Reagan, “The Farewell Address Speech,” January 11, 1989, [http://www.reaganfoundation.org/pdf/Farewell\\_Address\\_011189.pdf](http://www.reaganfoundation.org/pdf/Farewell_Address_011189.pdf); Brent Scowcroft, “Who Can Harness History? Only the US,” *The New York Times*, July 2, 1993, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/07/02/opinion/who-can-harness-history-only-the-us.html>; Madeleine Albright,

In addition to being bipartisan, the rhetoric on US exceptionalism also seems to blur the dichotomy between Realists and Idealists. Although these two schools of thought contain different paradigms within themselves, Realism generally assigns a critical role to the concepts of power and *realpolitik* whereas Idealism typically stresses the importance of ideas and values, other than power, in shaping foreign policy. Since government officials often show elements of both schools in dealing with different foreign policy issues, at different times, it is particularly difficult to categorize any such individuals in a specific school. Despite this difficulty, some national leaders are commonly associated to one school instead of the other. Going back to our previous historical examples, individuals usually considered Realists include President Nixon, President Reagan, and Secretary of State Rice whereas Idealists include President Wilson, President Carter, and President G.W. Bush. The similarity of their remarks suggests that affiliation to one school does not significantly affect the rhetorical use of the idea of US exceptionalism.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, consensus on US exceptionalism is not confined within the narrow circle of the foreign policy elite. It is a sentiment widely shared and cherished by the US society as a whole. Evidence of this consensus is everywhere we look. It can be found in the national literature. For example, Herman Melville, a XIX century American novelist, famous for being the author of *Moby-Dick*, writes, “we Americans are the peculiar chosen people -the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls.” Moreover, evidence is in writings on political philosophy. In one of his works, intellectual Herbert Croly states that “the faith of Americans in their country is religious, if not in its intensity, at any rate in its almost absolute and universal authority. It pervades the air we breathe and consciously or unconsciously, it enters largely into our personal lives as a formative influence.” In addition, the theme of a special US national mission to reshape the world is carved

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“Interview on NBC-TV,” February 19, 1998, [http://www.fas.org/news/iraq/1998/02/19/98021907\\_tpo.html](http://www.fas.org/news/iraq/1998/02/19/98021907_tpo.html); Madeleine Albright, “Commencement Address at Harvard University,” June 5, 1997, <http://www.usaid.gov/multimedia/video/marshall/albright.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Ole R. Holsti, “Theories of International Relations,” in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson (eds) (Cambridge University Press, 2004), <http://www.duke.edu/~pfeaver/holsti.pdf>; James McCormick, *American Foreign Policy and Process*, Fifth (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010), 102–103; Mearsheimer, “Liberal Talk, Realist Thinking”; William D. Anderson and Sterling J. Kernek, “How ‘Realistic’ Is Reagan’s Diplomacy?,” *Political Science Quarterly* 100, no. 3 (Autumn 1985): 389–409; Constance G. Anthony, “American Democratic Interventionism: Romancing the Iconic Woodrow Wilson,” *International Studies Perspectives* 9, no. 3 (August 2008): 239–53; Andrew Fiala, “Crusades, Just Wars, and the Bush Doctrine,” *Peace Review* 19, no. 2 (2007): 165–72; Robert D. Kaplan, “Kissinger, Metternich, and Realism,” *The Atlantic Online*, June 1999, <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/99jun/9906kissinger.htm>; Glenn Kessler, “A Foreign Policy, In Two Words,” *The Washington Post*, June 8, 2007, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/07/AR2007060702239\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/07/AR2007060702239_pf.html); Michael J. Mazarr, “George W. Bush, Idealist,” *International Affairs* 79, no. 3 (2003): 503–22; McCormick, *American Foreign Policy and Process*; Thomas Schwartz, “Henry Kissinger: Realism, Domestic Politics, and the Struggle Against Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 22, no. 1 (March 2011): 121–41.

into one side of the Great Seal of the United States, which reads *Novus Ordo Seclorum* -a new order of the ages. The topicality of the idea of US exceptionalism is also evident in the results of popular survey polls. A 2011 poll, for example, shows that 49 percent of the public in the United States thought that US culture, although not perfect, “is superior to others”. Confronted with the same question, 47 percent of respondents in Germany, 44 percent in Spain, 32 percent in Britain, and 27 percent in France agreed that their own cultures were superior to those of other nations. Perhaps even more telling is the result of a poll taken in 2010. When asked if they believed that the United States had a “unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world” 80 percent of Americans answered positively. Furthermore, influential scholars and columnists make frequent use of the same idea, “this identification of nationality with political Creed or values makes the United States virtually unique”, and again, “America is no mere international citizen [...] America is in a position to reshape norms, alter expectations and create new realities.” According to a 2012 research, since 1980 the theme of US exceptionalism appeared in national publications 457 times during the first 20 years, 2,558 times during the following decade, and roughly 4,172 times since 2010. National exceptionalism in the United States appears to be a lingering idea entrenched in the psyche of US society.<sup>66</sup>

How do we explain the time-honored persistence and the widespread consensus surrounding the American self-image of being a chosen people with a special mission to reshape the world?

A generally accepted explanation finds the roots of this persistence and consensus in the distinct history of US political culture - a history largely characterized by stability and continuity of institutional structures and of core political and social principles. Stability and continuity were mainly possible because the United States was spared the havoc of foreign invasions (due mostly to its relative geographical isolation) and the shocks of great social revolutions. This, in turn, significantly reduced the likelihood of the emergence of alternative ideas challenging US exceptionalism. Another element that could have reinforced the idea of national exceptionalism is the success of the United States as a country, not only domestically, in terms of the American Dream (the “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with

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<sup>66</sup> For an analysis on the presence of the idea of national exceptionalism in US literature refer to Susan M. Matarese, *American Foreign Policy and the Utopian Imagination* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); Herman Melville, *White-Jacket (1850)* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 150; Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life (1909)* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), 1; Pew Global Attitudes Project, *The American-Western European Values Gap*; USA Today/Gallup Poll, *Americans See U.S. as Exceptional; 37% Doubt Obama Does*, December 10, 2010, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/145358/americans-exceptional-doubt-obama.aspx>; Huntington, “American Ideals versus American Institutions,” 50; Charles Krauthammer, “The Bush Doctrine,” *Time Magazine*, March 5, 2001, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,999353-1,00.html>; Terrence M. McCoy, “How Joseph Stalin Invented ‘American Exceptionalism,’” *The Atlantic Online*, March 15, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/03/how-joseph-stalin-invented-american-exceptionalism/254534/>.

opportunity for each according to ability or achievement”<sup>67</sup>) but also internationally. In less than two hundred and fifty years, in fact, the United States has achieved impressive results. It has been able to evolve from thirteen small English colonies, to become an independent state within an international system dominated by Britain, to be one of the two superpowers during the Cold War bipolar system, and eventually to reach the status of world hegemon after the demise of the Soviet Union. In terms of great power politics, this is a stunning track record that strengthens the idea of national exceptionalism.<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, it is interesting to mention the opinion of an informed non-American who pointed out a facet of US society that could partly explain the popularity and resilience of the idea of national exceptionalism in the country. Having had a first-hand experience with his son going to school in California, English journalist Andrew Gumbel writes, “children are recruited from the very start of their school careers to believe in Team America, whose oft-repeated mantra is: we’re the good guys, we always strive to do the right thing, we live in the greatest country in the world. No other point of view, no other cultural mindset, is ever seriously contemplated.” Besides, it is not only the education system but also the mainstream national media that commonly help to spread and perpetuate the image of the Americans as an exceptional people. Journalists of the mainstream media are also products of their own society and, as such, they tend to share and disseminate its core values and beliefs. As indicated by academic Doris Graber, “[US] media usually support the political system and rarely question its fundamental tenets. Mainstream media limit their criticism to what they perceive as perversions of fundamental social and political values.” Using professor Daniel Hallin’s terminology, US media coverage moves between the “sphere of consensus” and the “sphere of legitimate controversy”, but it generally ignores whatever perspective falls into the “sphere of illegitimate sources and views”. Although not unique to the case of the United States, educational institutions and mass media, along with parents and peers, play an important role in shaping the values and ideas of US citizens and in how these values and ideas are transmitted from one generation to another.<sup>69</sup>

Finally, the United States is a country with a relatively short history and deeply diverse in terms of religious affiliation and ethnicity. Given such a specific context, the idea of US exceptionalism soon

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<sup>67</sup> James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1931), 415.

<sup>68</sup> Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong*, 28–32; Mead, *Special Providence*.

<sup>69</sup> Andrew Gumbel, “What Americans Know,” *The Independent*, September 8, 2003, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/what-americans-know-757967.html>; Doris Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics* (Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1989), 24; Daniel Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986); Noam Chomsky, *Pirates and Emperors, Old and New* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).



came to be seen as an essential element of the US national identity and a vital instrument to hold the nation together.<sup>70</sup>

World history has been punctuated by images of national exceptionalism. Nevertheless, exceptionalism in the United States has showed some distinctive characteristics that make it a fundamental aspect of the country's national identity and public discourse. US exceptionalism consists mainly of a longstanding religious component as well as a time-honored secular one. It is also characterized by the professed universality of its values, and the persistence and resilience of its influence. Moreover, we have seen that the idea of US exceptionalism has enjoyed widespread consensus not only at the level of foreign policy elites but also within the larger US society.

### Example Versus Action

As described above, the national self-image of the Americans as an exceptional people has been a pervasive theme throughout much of US history. However, the same kind of widespread consensus has not always been translated to support for a single US strategy in pursuit of its special mission to reshape the world according to its universal values. Interestingly, exceptionalism in the United States has been used to justify foreign policies of both distant aloofness and active interventionism. Can the US special mission be carried out by setting an example? Or does it require direct action? Ever since the United States adopted its exceptionalist credo, the primary debate over implementation has centered on two competing schools of thought. Such a confrontation has also been reflected in the foreign policy discourse where two distinct brands of public rhetoric have coexisted; each one supporting a particular strategy.<sup>71</sup>

On the one hand, the "lead by example" strategy calls for restraint in foreign policy. Proponents of this strategy argue that immoderate interventionism in an immoral international system would eventually corrupt the republican values of the domestic system. Democracy is a fragile plant that

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<sup>70</sup> Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*, 315; Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong*, 59.

<sup>71</sup> Davis and Lynn-Jones, "Citty Upon a Hill"; The "lead by action" strategy is often referred to also as the "crusade" strategy. The debate between "lead by action" and "lead by example" strategies is analyzed in Klaus P. Fischer, *America in White, Black, and Gray: The Stormy 1960s* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2006), particularly in chapter 4, "Beacon or Crusader: Splits in American Foreign Policy"; Matarese, *American Foreign Policy and the Utopian Imagination*, particularly in chapter 3, "Visions of World Redemption"; Robert W. Tucker, "Exemplar or Crusader? Reflections on America's Role," *National Interest*, no. 5 (Fall 1986); Bouchet, "The Democracy Tradition in US Foreign Policy and the Obama Presidency"; Barry R. Posen, "Pull Back," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1 (February 2013); Stephen Brooks, John Ikenberry, and William Wohlforth, "Lean Forward," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1 (February 2013).

needs constant care and protection. Liberty should first be perfected at home and then exported to others solely by the force of the example. Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers of the United States, was a strenuous supporter of this strategy. In one of his letters, Jefferson maintains, “I hope that peace and amity with all nations will long be the character of our land, and that its prosperity under the Charter will react on the mind of Europe, and profit her by the example.”<sup>72</sup>

In another, he writes,

*“the station which we occupy among the nations of the earth is honorable, but awful. Trusted with the destinies of this solitary republic of the world, the only monument of human rights, and the sole depository of the sacred fire of freedom and self-government, from hence it is to be lighted up in other regions of the earth, if other regions of the earth shall ever become susceptible of its benign influence.”*<sup>73</sup>

The strategy of the example was also advanced by US President John Quincy Adams in one of his most recalled quotes: “she [The United States] goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will commend the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example.” The supporters of the “lead by example” strategy contend that, in order to carry out its special mission in the world, the United States should carefully avoid interventionism abroad and, instead, set an example at home for other nations.<sup>74</sup>

On the other hand, the “lead by action” strategy calls for an assertive foreign policy. Democracy and freedom at home are inextricably bound to an active advancement of these same US values abroad. As early as 1795, another US founding father, Alexander Hamilton, describes the United States as “the embryo of a great empire.” The narrative of Manifest Destiny emblematically represents this strategy of action. John O’Sullivan, the American journalist who coined the term in the 1840s, writes that it was “the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.” O’Sullivan explains that “we are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can.” Although originally framed for the United States’ westward continental expansion, the narrative of Manifest Destiny was later adjusted

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<sup>72</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to the Earl of Buchan,” 1803, [http://www.sullivan-county.com/identity/jeff\\_letters.htm](http://www.sullivan-county.com/identity/jeff_letters.htm).

<sup>73</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to the Citizen of Washington,” 1809, [http://www.sullivan-county.com/identity/jeff\\_letters.htm](http://www.sullivan-county.com/identity/jeff_letters.htm).

<sup>74</sup> John Quincy Adams, “Address on US Foreign Policy 1821,” July 4, 1821, [http://www.Presidentialrhetoric.com/historicspeeches/adams\\_jq/foreignpolicy.html](http://www.Presidentialrhetoric.com/historicspeeches/adams_jq/foreignpolicy.html).

to promote US interventions throughout the world.<sup>75</sup> The “lead by action” interpretation of the US special mission to reshape the world is also reinforced by a strong religious element. Indeed, since the early XIX century, American churches have been sending their missionaries throughout the non-Protestant world to actively make converts, open missionary stations and schools. American churches have seen the spread of US religious values as a critical means to redeem the world. Therefore, along with a secular element, there is also a religious one that has called for an active advancement of US values abroad.<sup>76</sup>

The existence of two opposite strategies has often given rise to lively debates and passionate confrontations on issues of foreign policy. A first confrontation took place during the George Washington administration and revolved around the ratification of the Jay Treaty with Britain (1795). Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton supported the ratification of the treaty and an assertive foreign policy. Thomas Jefferson, then secretary of state, was against the treaty and in favor of a foreign policy of aloofness. One of the main criticisms moved to the Jay Treaty was that overly close economic relations with London would endanger US republican values and the country’s recently acquired freedom. A second major confrontation concerned the 1846-48 war against neighboring Mexico. It saw President James Polk pushing for the annexation of the Mexican territories of California and New Mexico against the opposition of several members of the Congress, such as Democratic Senator John C. Calhoun and Whig Senator Joshua R. Giddings. The Spanish-American War of 1898 prompted a third heated debate. President William McKinley’s project to annex the Spanish territories of Hawaii, The Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico faced a strong resistance by a diverse group of politicians and intellectuals united under the banner of the Anti-Imperialist League. A fourth contest regarded the US participation in the First World War. Senators George W. Norris and Robert M. La Follette were two leading voices within the anti-interventionist camp. One strong argument against intervention was that President Woodrow

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<sup>75</sup> The concept of “international” Manifest Destiny is supported by the work of several authors: Kinzer, *Overthrow: America’s Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*; Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy*, 129–130; Ruger Workshop, *American Foreign Policy: Regional Perspectives* (Newport: US Naval War College, 2009); Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Spencer Tucker (ed), *The Encyclopedia of the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009); William A. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: Norton, 2009).

<sup>76</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “The Defence No. 2,” in *The Camillus Essays*, 1795, [http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com\\_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=875&chapter=63946&layout=html&Itemid=27](http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=875&chapter=63946&layout=html&Itemid=27); John L. O’Sullivan, “Annexation,” *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 17, no. 1 (July 1845): 5–10; on the concept of Manifest Destiny in the United States refer also to Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission In American History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963); Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*; John L. O’Sullivan, “The Great Nation of Futurity,” *The United States Democratic Review* 6, no. 23 (November 1839): 426–30; Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy*, chap. 4; Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 59–63.

Wilson was taking the United States into war only to serve the interests of Wall Street bankers who had loaned large sums of money to the *Entente* powers.<sup>77</sup> The outbreak of the Second World War set the stage for a fifth confrontation between the supporters of the two different foreign policy strategies. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Century Group favored US intervention, while the organization America First, and its leader Charles A. Lindbergh, strongly resisted it.<sup>78</sup>

Academic Christopher Layne holds that since the 1940s US grand strategy has been systematically based on “strategic internationalism”; that is on the assumption that “to be secure, the United States must exert the full panoply of its power – military, economic, and ideological- on the international system in order to shape its external environment.” Likewise, scholar Walter Russell Mead identifies US President Harry Truman’s 1947 enunciation of his Containment Doctrine for the Cold War as the event that definitively crystallized the predominant status of the “lead by action” strategy in US foreign policy. On that occasion President Truman strongly stressed the necessity for the United States to actively commit itself on a global scale to defend “the free peoples of the world” to maintain their freedoms against the attacks of “armed minorities” or “external pressures”. Words were soon followed by action and, between 1945 and 1999, the United States carried out 40 unilateral attempts to overthrow foreign governments and it was involved in at least 30 operations aimed at quelling nationalist movements in foreign countries.<sup>79</sup>

Some observers have argued that, despite evidence of US activism abroad, the US general public is probably less interventionist than US foreign policy elites. However, there is not unequivocal evidence supporting such an argument. On the contrary, according to a 2012 study by The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, since 1947 the number of Americans backing an “active” role of the United States in world affairs has ranged from 54 to 72 percent whereas the number of those advocating for Washington to “stay out” of world affairs has ranged from only 21 to 38 percent. After WWII, the strategy of the example has not disappeared but has markedly lost its power. The persistence of the rhetoric of the “lead by example” strategy throughout US history has largely

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<sup>77</sup> The Entente coalition primarily consisted of Britain, France, and Russia.

<sup>78</sup> For a general overview these particular events in US history refer to Paul S. Boyer, *The Oxford Companion to United States History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Eric Foner and John A. Garraty, *The Reader’s Companion to American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991); Arnaldo Testi, *La Formazione Degli Stati Uniti* (Bologna: Mulino, 2003); Arnaldo Testi, *Il Secolo Degli Stati Uniti* (Bologna: Mulino, 2008).

<sup>79</sup> Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*, 7; Mead, *Special Providence*; Davis and Lynn-Jones, “Citty Upon a Hill”; Truman, “The Truman Doctrine Speech”; Gore Vidal, *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How We Got to Be So Hated* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002), 22–41.

contributed to the illusion of US isolationism in world affairs, that is to the illusion of the Americans, as a people, reluctant to engage in international affairs.<sup>80</sup>

US isolationism is an illusion because it mostly originates from a superficial and partial analysis of historical events. Economically, the United States has always favored high levels of foreign engagement, especially in terms of international trade. Indeed, since its independence and despite short-lived attempts at economic isolation, the United States has steadily increased its commercial relations with foreign countries. At the turn of the XX century, the country already had the largest economy in the world.<sup>81</sup> US historian and then Senator Albert J. Beveridge effectively describes this American penchant for international trade: “American factories are making more than the American people can use; American soil is producing more than they can consume. Fate has written our policy for us; the trade of the world must and shall be ours.” In the literature on the history of the United States, these high levels of US economic and commercial engagement with the rest of the world have been commonly referred to as the Open Door policy.<sup>82</sup>

Even if we accept the marginalization of the economic aspect of foreign policy, it is still hard to describe US behavior in world affairs as isolationist. If we take into consideration the historical confrontations between the “lead by action” and the “lead by example” strategies discussed above, we find that the former has generally dominated. President Theodore Roosevelt briefly sums up US achievements in foreign policy during the XIX century (a time usually considered as one of relative US isolationism) as follows:

*“Of course our whole national history has been one of expansion. Under Washington and Adams we expanded westward to the Mississippi; under Jefferson we expanded across the continent to the mouth of the Columbia; under Monroe we expanded into Florida; and then into Texas and California; and finally, largely through the instrumentality of Seward, into Alaska; while under every administration the process of expansion in the great plains and the Rockies has continued with growing rapidity.”*<sup>83</sup>

In about one hundred years the United States through wars, treaties, and purchases tripled the total area of its national territory. Such a territorial expansion did not happen in a vacuum. The United

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<sup>80</sup> Smeltz, *Foreign Policy in the New Millennium*, 8.

<sup>81</sup> Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of The Great Powers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987).

<sup>82</sup> Albert J. Beveridge, April 1897, quoted in Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 28. The name Open Door policy originates from US Secretary of State John Hay’s Open Door Notes (1899-1900). In these notes, Secretary Hay outlined the US policy of promoting equal opportunity for international trade in China.

<sup>83</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, “Expansion and Peace,” *The Independent*, December 21, 1899.

States increased its territory at the expenses of the Indian nations, the French and Spanish empires, and Mexico. According to a study by the US Congress, in the one hundred years spanning from 1798 through 1898, the United States used its military forces abroad at least 98 times. That is almost one military intervention abroad every year, a conservative measure, if we consider that the congressional study excludes the coeval periodic use of US troops against the Indian nations on the American continent. The same study by the Congress shows that during the interwar period (1918-1941), another time of alleged US isolationism, the United States intervened militarily abroad about 36 times. As of 2011, the United States was involved, at different levels, in military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia; America had little less than 700 military installations overseas; and its military expenses accounted for almost half of the world's total. These data can hardly be described as the record of a nation with a restrained foreign policy.<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, an incomplete analysis of three specific historical events has fueled the illusion of US isolationism.<sup>85</sup> These are: President George Washington's Farewell Address (1796), the enunciation of the Monroe Doctrine (1823), and the US Senate's negative vote on the Covenant of the League of Nations (1919).

The general wisdom holds that in his Farewell Address, President George Washington warns his fellow citizens to avoid "permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world," thus advancing a policy of isolation. This is a literal interpretation that does not take into consideration the particular historical circumstances of that time. Back then, the United States had recently gained its independence from Britain and it was still too weak to meddle in conflicts among the much more powerful European nations. Notably, in the same speech, President Washington hints at the possibility that the United States will adopt a different stance when the circumstances become more favorable. Washington says that

*"the period is not far off, when we may defy material injury from external annoyance; when we may take such an attitude as will cause the neutrality we may at any time resolve upon to be scrupulously respected; when belligerent nations, under the impossibility of making*

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<sup>84</sup> US Congress, "Background Information on the Use of US Armed Forces in Foreign Countries" (Committee Print, 1975); US Department of Defense, "Base Structure Report Fiscal Year 2010 Baseline," September 30, 2009, <http://www.acq.osd.mil/ie/download/bsr/BSR2010Baseline.pdf>; SIPRI, "The SIPRI Military Expenditure Database," accessed April 16, 2012, <http://milexdata.sipri.org/>.

<sup>85</sup> The study of US history has been characterized by different interpretations of historical events. For an overview of these opposing "schools of thought" see Jerald A. Combs, *American Diplomatic History: Two Centuries of Changing Interpretations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983); for an orthodox perspective read Dexter Perkins, *The American Approach to Foreign Policy* (New York: Atheneum, 1968); for a revisionist reading see Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*; for a postrevisionist interpretation read Jerel A. Rosati and James M. Scott, *The Politics of United States Foreign Policy* (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010).

*acquisitions upon us, will not lightly hazard the giving us provocation; when we may choose peace or war, as our interest guided by justice shall Counsel [sic].*"<sup>86</sup>

Additionally, President Washington also maintains that the United States "at no distant period" would emerge as "a great Nation" in world affairs. This reading of Washington's call to avoid permanent alliances and entanglements illustrates that the US president was not suggesting a policy of simple isolationism but, rather, a more nuanced strategy of temporary nonalignment.<sup>87</sup>

President James Monroe's doctrine is also considered strong evidence for an aloof foreign policy. In fact, Monroe's document holds that "[US] policy in regard to Europe [...] remains the same, which is, not to interfere in the internal concerns of any of its powers." Nevertheless, a more accurate reading of the same document would describe the United States as still avoiding direct involvement in European affairs (because aware of its inferior military capabilities) but nonetheless ready to lay claim to its own sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>88</sup>

Indeed, the Monroe Doctrine clearly states that:

*"[Americans] should consider any attempt on the part [of European countries] to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety," and that "we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing [the countries of the Americas], or controlling in any other manner their destiny, by any European power in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States."*<sup>89</sup>

In 1895, Secretary of State Richard Olney reinforces this latter interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine when he declares that "the United States is practically sovereign on this continent [the Americas] and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interposition." Additionally, at the turn of the XX century, President Theodore Roosevelt gives more credit to this alternative reading by articulating his own corollary to the Monroe Doctrine: "in the Western Hemisphere the adhesion of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power." All that considered, the Monroe Doctrine was not only a call for the principle of non-interference from European powers in the Western Hemisphere but it also, and perhaps

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<sup>86</sup> George Washington, "The Farewell Address Speech," September 19, 1796, [http://www.pbs.org/georgewashington/milestones/farewell\\_address\\_read4.html](http://www.pbs.org/georgewashington/milestones/farewell_address_read4.html).

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> James Monroe, "State of the Union Address 1823," December 2, 1823, <http://www.Presidentialrhetoric.com/historicspeeches/monroe/stateoftheunion.1823.html>.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

primarily, affirmed the US exclusive duty and right to intervene and direct events in that region of the world.<sup>90</sup>

Finally, according to the isolationist view, the US Senate's refusal to ratify the Covenant of the League of Nations represents an additional sign of the US unwillingness to get involved in world affairs. Probably this was in fact the position of a small minority led by Senator Robert M. La Follette, who had opposed the entrance into WWI in the first place. However, as pointed out by reputable historians, the great debate surrounding the League, far from being a call for a restrained foreign policy, was "something of a family feud" on "how America should sustain and extend its power and authority" in the world. In other words, it was essentially a debate on the different strategies the United States should have applied in the pursuit of an assertive foreign policy.<sup>91</sup>

The principal reason for the Senate's vote against the covenant, was the provision contained in article X:

*"The Members of the League undertake to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League. In case of any such aggression or in case of any threat or danger of such aggression the Council shall advise upon the means by which this obligation shall be fulfilled."*<sup>92</sup>

The critics of the ratification argued that such a system of collective security would infringe on US sovereignty and unnecessarily reduce US freedom of action. In its reservations with regard to the covenant, the US Senate stated that:

*"The United States assumes no obligation to preserve the territorial integrity or political independence of any other country or to interfere in controversies between nations -whether members of the League or not- under the provisions of Article X, or to employ the military or naval forces of the United States under any article of the treaty for any purpose, unless in any particular case the Congress, which, under the Constitution, has the sole power to declare*

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<sup>90</sup> US Secretary of State Richard Olney quoted in George B. Young, "Intervention Under the Monroe Doctrine: The Olney Corollary," *Political Science Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (June 1942): 247–80; Theodore Roosevelt, "Annual Message to Congress," December 6, 1904, [http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com\\_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=2282&chapter=216461&layout=html&Itemid=27](http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=2282&chapter=216461&layout=html&Itemid=27).

<sup>91</sup> Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy*, 137; Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 110.

<sup>92</sup> "Covenant of the League of Nations," 1919 1924, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/leagcov.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp).



*war or authorize the employment of the military or naval forces of the United States, shall by act or joint resolution so provide.*"<sup>93</sup>

Therefore, it was not a penchant for isolationism but, rather, a concern about national sovereignty and freedom of action that mainly informed the US Senate's decision to reject the covenant.

In sum, the history of US foreign policy has been characterized by the rhetorical confrontation between two major opposite strategies: that of "lead by action" and that of "lead by example". It is interesting to notice that the progressive rise of the "lead by action" strategy to a dominant position in US foreign policy rhetoric went hand in hand with the rise of the United States' relative military, economic, and political power. The reason for this pattern may be explained by the words of academic Robert Gilpin. Gilpin argues that states are continually "tempted to try to increase [their] control over the environment [...] A more wealthy and more powerful state [...] will select a larger bundle of security and welfare goals than a less wealthy and less powerful state." Accordingly, throughout US history, a rhetoric calling for an assertive foreign policy has reflected the ever-expanding goals and ambitions of a country whose international position changed from that of being a colony, to that of being first a continental power, then a regional power, and finally a global power in little more than two centuries.<sup>94</sup>

### **The Dark Side of the Creed**

The American Creed is unquestionably a central aspect of US public rhetoric. Despite its special status, however, the Creed does not have a monopoly on the US public discourse. According to scholars Daniel Deudney and Jeffrey Meiser, the American Creed has to coexist with "idiosyncratic factors of national identity rooted in ethnicity, religion and race." These idiosyncratic factors, that we cloak together under the name "Dark Side of the Creed", often represent minority views, although, as pointed out by professor Anatol Lieven, "they have a natural tendency to rise to the surface in times of crisis and conflict." The ethnic, religious, and racial origins of the Dark Side occasionally put it at odds with the professed universalism of the American Creed. Writer Michael Lind hits the point when he says "America's universal mission contains certain elements of

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<sup>93</sup> Particularly interesting excerpts of the debate on the ratification of the Covenant of the League of Nations can be found in US Congress, "Congressional Record," June 28, 1919, 8777–8778; 8768–8769; 8781–8784, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=697>.

<sup>94</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 94–95, 22–23; Other interesting works dealing with the impact of relative power on a country's foreign policy include Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of The Great Powers*; Michael Mandelbaum, *The Fates of Nations: The Search for National Security in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

universal values which are in fact not universal at all but very visibly part of a purely American culture and way of life.”<sup>95</sup>

Freedom, self-determination, democracy, free trade, and capitalism are deeply cherished aspects of the American Creed. Americans generally consider them to have universal value and to be universally applicable. Sometimes, however, Americans also think that not all peoples are ready or capable to enjoy them. Particular countries may need guidance, whereas others may make mistakes. If this happens, it is the United States’ duty, as the best interpreter and bearer of these values, to intervene and put other peoples back on track. “Self-government! Why, these people are no more fit for self-government than gunpowder is for hell,” US General William Shafter reportedly answered to a journalist when asked about the possibility of Cubans exercising self-government after the Spanish-American War (1898). Allegedly because Cubans were not considered ready and capable to rule themselves, the United States denied them the right to self-determination and, instead, put the country under close US tutelage. Although later the Platt Amendment (1901) ended direct US occupation of Cuba, it also contained provisions effectively granting the United States continued indirect control of the island.<sup>96</sup>

Indeed, one main component of the Dark Side of the Creed is that of racial superiority. The concept of a hierarchy among races is a European legacy of the first American settlers. In its original brand, it was specifically a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) superiority. Back then and for a long time, white people, coming from Britain and belonging to a Protestant denomination of Christianity, enjoyed an unchallenged privileged status in US society. This concept of racial superiority in the United States led to the so-called “Jeffersonian paradox”. The paradox goes as follows: how is it possible that the same people who, as Thomas Jefferson, wrote in the US Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” could accept and justify a socio-economic system based on slavery? The answer to this paradox is simple: according to the idea of racial superiority, not *all* men are equal.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Deudney and Meiser, “American Exceptionalism,” 27; Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong*, 6; Michael Lind, *The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and The Fourth American Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 3.

<sup>96</sup> Tony Smith, “From Woodrow Wilson in 1902 to the Bush Doctrine in 2002: Democracy Promotion as Imperialism,” *International Politics* 48 (May 2011): 229–50; David F. Healy, *Drive to Hegemony: The United States and the Caribbean, 1898-1907* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 36; Congress of the United States, “Platt Amendment,” 1901, <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=55&page=transcript>.

<sup>97</sup> Works examining the racial aspect of the Dark Side of the Creed include Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Martin N. Marger, *Race and Ethnic Relations: American and*

After different and successive waves of migrants, firstly from non Anglo-Saxon Europe and then from all over the world; after the trauma of the American Civil War; after the shocking experiences of the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the racist Nazi propaganda; and, finally, after the domestic challenge posed by the US civil rights movement, the concept of racial superiority was progressively recast into the more acceptable and politically correct one of cultural superiority. The declining power of racial thought in the United States manifested itself in the election of Barack Obama, an African-American, to the US presidency in 2008. Nevertheless, saying that racism is dwindling in the US public sphere does not necessarily mean that it has disappeared from the private one or with reference to non-Americans. The current US debate about Orientalism is a case in point. The tendency to consider Muslims alternatively as backward, evil, and/or ill-suited for democracy shows how stereotypes toward different ethnicities and cultures are still persistent and widespread in the United States.<sup>98</sup>

Another important component of the Dark Side of the Creed is US profound wariness of revolutions.<sup>99</sup> At first, this statement may sound curious given that the United States itself was born out of a revolution and US revolutionaries strenuously fought for their own right to self-determination. However, throughout history, the United States has proved reluctant to accept other people's revolutions, especially if such revolutions did not follow the path drawn by the American one. According to US diplomat George Kennan, the United States has the "inveterate tendency to judge others to the extent to which they contrive to be like ourselves [the Americans]." Professor Michael Hunt identifies the US model of a good revolution as the one described by Thomas Jefferson and John Adams in the early XIX century. Such a model calls for a moderate revolution, against an illegitimate power, led by the nation's better classes, with the goal of protecting human and property rights through constitutional arrangements. The US tendency of judging the legitimacy

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*Global Perspectives*, Fourth Edition (Belmont: Thomson Higher Education, 2006); Jaime E. Rodriguez and Kathryn Vincent, *Common Border, Uncommon Paths: Race, Culture, and National Identity in US-Mexican Relations* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1997); On the Jeffersonian Paradox see George Schoepflin and Geoffrey Hosking, *Myths and Nationhood* (London: C. Hurst and Company, 1997); US Congress, "US Declaration of Independence."

<sup>98</sup> Previously in this chapter we have already talked about the current attitude of the US public toward the idea of cultural superiority. A historical overview on the evolution of the idea of race in the United States is provided in a short movie by The American Anthropological Association, *The Story of Race*, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=No5ai6LZLFg>; On Orientalism see for example the debate between Bernard Lewis and Edward Said: Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

<sup>99</sup> Some valuable studies on US reactions to other countries' revolutions include John L. Gaddis, *Russia, the Soviet Union, and the United States* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978); William A. Williams, *America Confronts a Revolutionary World: 1776-1976* (New York: William Morrow, 1976); Richard E. Welch, *Response to Revolution: The United States and the Cuban Revolution, 1959-1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Jordan D. Winthrop, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1500-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1968).

of foreign revolutions against Americans' own experience has been a catalyst for conflict because, as bluntly expressed in a quotation often attributed to the Chinese revolutionary Mao Tse-Tung, "revolution is not a dinner party, nor an essay, nor a painting, nor a piece of embroidery; it cannot be advanced softly, gradually, carefully, considerately, respectfully, politely, plainly, and modestly. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another." As a consequence, the United States has very often confronted revolutions largely different from its own. The result of these encounters, particularly in the case of social revolutions, has ranged from mere suspicion to open opposition, even including military interventions aimed at suppressing the revolutionary movement.<sup>100</sup>

Notably, there has been times when the Dark Side had a strong impact on US foreign policy. The argument of racial superiority, for example, played a central part in the heated debates surrounding the US territorial expansion of the XIX century. On the one hand, the supporters of US expansionism interpreted racial superiority as a US duty to help inferior peoples to develop. On the other, the opponents to US expansionism warned about the risk of mixing the racial purity of the American people with less perfect nations. The debates on the annexation of former Mexican territories or of the Hawaii and The Philippines are text-book examples. Similarly, wariness of revolutions also influenced the international behavior of the United States. The US policy response to the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and to other XX century revolutionary movements in Central and South America bear evident signs of this influence.<sup>101</sup>

The presence of *national qualifications* makes it difficult, especially for foreign observers not keen with this "dark" aspect of the American Creed, to fully understand specific US foreign policies. In particular, cultural superiority and weariness of revolutions are patently at odds with some of the ideals, like equality, freedom, and self-determination, that the United States publicly professes to champion. National qualifications to the Creed, therefore, have the negative effect of reinforcing the disturbing perception of a disconnect existing between US foreign policy rhetoric and US foreign policy practice which, in turn, generates common charges of US hypocrisy and double standards.

The image of the United States as an exceptional country provides many of the themes that contribute to the construction of the myth of US national innocence in foreign policy. In the

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<sup>100</sup> Joan Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 22–23; George Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 135; Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy*, 96; Trisha Ziff, *Che Guevara: Revolutionary & Icon* (New York: Abrams Image, 2006), 66; Vidal, *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How We Got to Be So Hated*; Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*; Bouchet, "The Democracy Tradition in US Foreign Policy and the Obama Presidency."

<sup>101</sup> Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy*, in particular chapter 3 "The Hierarchy of Race" and chapter 4 "The Perils of Revolution."

following section, we first describe the myth of US innocence and then discuss how this myth has affected the public debate on US foreign policy.

### **The Myth of US Innocence**

National myths are half-truth narratives that purport to explain the origins, characteristics, and purposes of a nation. They constitute the building blocks of a country's national identity. National myths also help to simplify and make understandable to single individuals and entire societies an otherwise extremely complex world. Notably, such national narratives are not unique to a single country or culture but, rather, they have commonly manifested themselves across different regions at different times. According to academic Godfrey Hodgson, "all nations live by myths. Any nation is the sum of the consciousness of its people: the chaotic infinitude of the experience and perceptions of millions alive and death." In fact, if institutionalized, spread, and perpetuated through public rhetoric, educational institutions, official commemorations, and the media, national myths can assume a privileged role in the formation of a nation's collective memory.<sup>102</sup>

The literature on myth-making identifies three distinct types of general narratives. The first type is the "self-glorifying" myth that consists of inflated or false claims about national virtues and selfless behavior. The second type, the "self-whitewashing" myth, contains denials or rationalizations of past wrongdoings. The final type, the "other-maligning" myth, denigrates others, blames them for the nation's problems, or accuses them of malicious intentions.<sup>103</sup>

For the scope of this research the myth of innocence acquires special relevance insofar as it represents the national narrative generally used to describe the foreign policy of the United States. This narrative draws most of its themes from the idea of US exceptionalism and encompasses aspects of all the three previously described types of myths. The national myth of innocence in world affairs holds that the United States intervenes always in reaction to external events or threats, it is constantly committed to just causes, and it acts invariably with good intentions and for the

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<sup>102</sup> Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time: From World War I to Nixon--What Happened and Why* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3–4.

<sup>103</sup> Works discussing the topic of national myth-making include David A. Mendeloff, "Truth-Telling and Mythmaking in Post-Soviet Russia: Pernicious Historical Ideas, Mass Education, and Interests Conflict" (PhD dissertation, MIT, 2001); Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Bradley A. Thayer, *Darwin and International Relations: On the Evolutionary Origins of War and Ethnic Conflict* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004); Stephen Van Evera, "Primed for Peace: Europe After the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 3 (Winter 1990); Stephen Van Evera, "Hypotheses on Nationalism and War," *International Security* 18, no. 4 (Spring 1994).

noblest purposes. The reasoning behind the myth goes as follows: the universal validity and absolute morality of US values are self-evident; the United States is unequivocally and completely committed to these values and to its mission to spread them to other people; therefore, the actions of the United States cannot be evil and anyone who opposes them must be biased or wrong.<sup>104</sup>

The myth of national innocence is not a new theme in human history. Its origins date back to as early as the V century BC, at the time of the Peloponnesian War, when Athenian hero Pericles told his fellow citizens that “we alone do good to our neighbors not upon a calculation of interest, but in the confidence of freedom and in a frank fearless spirit.” The same theme was picked up after more than two thousand years by US President George Washington who declared, in striking similar terms, that the United States would “give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence.” At the start of the so-called American Century, another US president, Theodore Roosevelt, reaffirmed the innocent character of US foreign policy when he said in 1905 that “all that this country desires is that the other republics on this continent shall be happy and prosperous.” Amidst the suffering of the Second World War, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt joined the chorus and stated: “we are fighting today for security, for progress, and for peace, not only for ourselves but for all men, not only for one generation but for all generations. We are fighting to cleanse the world of ancient evils, ancient ills.” In the specific case of the United States, the belief in the myth of national innocence is further reinforced by a time-honored Puritan narrative imported by the first English and Scottish settlers. The colonists, indeed, imagined themselves as elected individuals who were born again in the New World and, after having undertaken a sort of cathartic experience, had been purified of all the sins of the Old Continent.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> For an analysis of US national myths refer to Loren Baritz, *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us Into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (New York: William Morrow, 1985); Jack Citrin, Ernst B. Hass, and Christopher Muste, “Is American Nationalism Changing? Implications for Foreign Policy?,” *International Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (March 1994): 1–31; William Cobb, *The American Foundation Myth in Vietnam* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1998); Richard J. Kerry, *The Star-Spangled Mirror: America’s Image of Itself and the World* (Savage: Rowman and Littlefield, 1990); Hodgson, *America in Our Time: From World War II to Nixon--What Happened and Why*; Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy*; Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy*; Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong*; Roger S. Whitcomb, *The American Approach to Foreign Affairs: An Uncertain Tradition* (Westport: Praeger, 1998).

<sup>105</sup> Pericles’ speech in Thucydides “History of the Peloponnesian War”, quoted in Charles A. Robinson, *Athens in the Age of Pericles* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), 43; Washington, “The Farewell Address Speech”; Theodore Roosevelt, “Fifth Annual Message,” December 5, 1905; Franklin D. Roosevelt, “State of the Union Address 1942,” January 6, 1942, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=16253#axzz1ksfbwdie>; Davis and Lynn-Jones, “Citty Upon a Hill”; Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*; Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy*.

Throughout US history, the narrative of national innocence has been sometimes challenged.<sup>106</sup> However, it remains to date an essential and recurrent feature of US public rhetoric and of the way many Americans commonly perceive their country's foreign policy. Influential scholars and famous writers have often acknowledged the existence of this national myth. Historian Reinhold Niebuhr points out that "we [the Americans] are –according to our traditional theory- the most innocent nation on earth." Professor Michael Mandelbaum, referring to post-Cold War US interventions, maintains that "for the United States, however, what lies behind intervention [...] is neither gold, nor glory, nor strategic calculation. It is, rather, sympathy." Herman Melville, a noted XIX century critic as well as author, describes the United States as a "political Messiah" and contends that "almost for the first time in the history of the earth, national selfishness is unbounded philanthropy; for we cannot do a good to America, but we give alms to the world."<sup>107</sup>

Although all the range of US actions on the international stage, be them political, social, commercial or economical, are generally interpreted through the prism of the myth of US innocence, this research has a special interest in studying the projection abroad of US military power. Attentive observers have emphasized the specific longstanding aspect of the myth that depicts the US military as a special force for good. Professor Anatol Lieven, when examining the US self-image of national innocence, notices "a widespread sense [in the United States] of the innate goodness of America's actions on the world stage, and of the US military in particular." Journalist Stephen Kinzer also describes this particular characteristic of the US soldier. Kinzer argues that Americans have always believed that their troops operated "on a higher moral plane because their cause was good." Finally, the US self-perception of the exceptional nature of its armed forces is effectively described by the words of US Secretary of State Elihu Root who stated in 1899: "the American soldier is different from all other soldiers of all other countries since the world began [...] he is the advance guard of liberty and justice, of law and order, and of peace and happiness."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Works critical of the narrative of US innocence in world affairs include: Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York: Macmillan, 1930); Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003); Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy*; Gabriel Kolko, *The Roots of American Foreign Policy; an Analysis of Power and Purpose* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969); Richard Rosecrance, ed., *America as an Ordinary Country* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979); Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*.

<sup>107</sup> Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, 23; Mandelbaum Michael, "The Reluctance to Intervene," *Foreign Policy*, 1994, 16; Herman Melville, *White Jacket*, quoted in Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 38.

<sup>108</sup> Anatol Lieven, "The Future of US Foreign Policy," 435; Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*, 53; Root Elihu, quoted in Bacevich, *American Empire*, 167; political scientist Andrew Bacevich also talks about a romanticized view of the soldier in the United States, Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9–33.

This image of the US military as an idealized force for good may be also the reason behind the widespread belief in the United States on the utility, and even sometimes the necessity, of war to obtain justice. According to a 2004 survey poll, 82 percent of Americans agreed with the statement that “under some conditions, war is necessary to obtain justice.” Such a high percentage shows the existence of a great gap between US and, for example, European perceptions. Indeed, the US percentage more than doubles the European average that is set at around 40 percent, with the UK at 69, Poland at 47, Italy at 35, France at 33, Germany at 31, and Spain at 25. On this point, academic John Mearsheimer contends that US leaders generally “portray war as a moral crusade or an ideological contest, rather than as a struggle for power” and he adds that “Americans tend to like this perspective, because it identifies the United States as a benevolent force in world politics and portrays its real and potential rivals as misguided or malevolent troublemakers.” The power and appeal of the myth of US innocence in world affairs is reaffirmed once more.<sup>109</sup>

The myth of national innocence has played an important role in shaping the “general wisdom” on the interpretation of historical events concerning the United States. This interpretation of history through the prism of this myth has tended to dismiss or downplay cases when US foreign policy has not developed in accordance with the narrative of innocence. In other words, it has minimized cases that show the existence of a disconnect between the policies actually undertaken by the United States and the values and ideas the country publicly professes to support. The myth, in fact, has provided the US public with a sort of sanitized, more comfortable, and easy-to-understand explanation of international affairs. Let us briefly analyze the myth’s influence upon explanations of certain key historical events. It is interesting to notice that they all closely follow the script of the myth of innocence: an external threat or event forces the United States to act; once the United States becomes involved in the international arena, it does so, not out of narrow self-interest but, rather, for the good of mankind.

According to this narrative, the United States fought its War of Independence (1775-1783) against the British Empire to obtain the right to self-determination. Since then, the country has made self-determination one of the essential components of its Creed and has publicly proclaimed its commitment to promote it abroad. Likewise, the United States was dragged into the First World War (1917-1918) because of Germany’s violation of US neutral rights. The altruistic objectives of the ensuing US engagement in the war were to make the world safe for democracy and end all wars. After that, the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor forced the United States to enter the Second

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<sup>109</sup> German Marshall Fund, *Transatlantic Trends* (German Marshall Fund, 2004), [http://trends.gmfus.org/doc/2004\\_english\\_key.pdf](http://trends.gmfus.org/doc/2004_english_key.pdf); Mearsheimer, “Liberal Talk, Realist Thinking.”



World War (1941-1945) and embark on another crusade to defend democracy against Fascism. In a similar fashion, during the Cold War (approximately 1946-1991) Soviet aggressiveness pushed the United States to take an active role in international affairs as the champion of the free world. Finally, the invasion and the military occupation of Afghanistan (2001-) and Iraq (2003-2011) were the response to the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The goals of both military interventions were to free the world from the threat of international terrorism and to put those countries on the path of democracy.<sup>110</sup>

As pointed out by academic Andrew Bacevich in 2003, “few scholars specializing in American diplomatic history today accept such an outline” of the history of US foreign policy. However, “in practice” the myth of US innocence “reigns today as the master narrative explaining (and justifying) the nation’s exercise of global power.” Influential revisionist historians, as Charles Beard, William Appleman Williams, and Noam Chomsky, criticize and cast doubts on the validity of this narrative. They also offer alternative interpretations of the facts that portray a less innocent and less benevolent United States’ foreign policy. Although the primary objective of this research is not to study the enduring debate among orthodox, revisionist, and post-revisionist accounts of US diplomatic history, mentioning at least an example of these criticisms to the myth of US innocence seems useful. As we saw before, with regard to the concept of self-determination, the narrative of the “innocent” United States holds that, once the country became independent, it started to openly manifest its selfless support to the right to self-determination of other nations. A critic may well notice that such an interpretation of the events disregards the fact that after achieving its independence the United States successively denied it to Native Americans, through its continental expansion (XVIII-XIX centuries), to the Confederate States of America, during the Civil War (1861-1865), and to Cuba, after the Spanish-American War (1898).<sup>111</sup>

Despite the existence of alternative views, the influence of the myth of US innocence still endures in the country’s public discourse. Tellingly, the narrative of innocence is a recurrent theme in the public statements of recent US presidents. In the fall of 1991, at Georgetown University, soon-to-be president Bill Clinton provided an interpretation of the history of the Cold War that clearly

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<sup>110</sup> This narrative about the history of the United States is analyzed in several works including Bacevich, *American Empire*; Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy*; Robert Kagan, “Cowboy Nation,” *New Republic*, October 12, 2006, <http://www.oen.us.net/cgi-bin/exec/view.cgi?archive=102&num=26209>; Rosati and Scott, *The Politics of United States Foreign Policy*.

<sup>111</sup> Bacevich, *American Empire*, 8; Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy*, 28–29. Articles featuring discussions among orthodox, revisionist, and post-revisionist interpretations of US history can be found on a number of academic journals, as for example “Diplomatic History”, “American Historical Review”, and “Journal of American History”. On this point, refer also to footnote 104 in this chapter.

illustrates the persistent strong influence of the narrative of national innocence in US public rhetoric:

*“I was born nearly half a century ago at the dawn of the Cold War, a time of great change, enormous opportunity, and uncertain peril. At a time when Americans wanted nothing more than to come home and resume lives of peace and quiet, our country had to summon the will for a new kind of war -- containing an expansionist and hostile Soviet Union which vowed to bury us. We had to find ways to rebuild the economies of Europe and Asia, encourage a worldwide movement toward independence, and vindicate our nation's principles in the world against yet another totalitarian challenge to liberal democracy.”*<sup>112</sup>

According to Clinton’s statement, after the end of the Second World War Americans were dragged, against their will, into a new conflict by yet another evil enemy. Moreover, the US struggle was not prompted by self-interest but, rather, by the noble cause of championing the world’s freedom. Similarly, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, US President George W. Bush announced that “tonight we are a country *awakened to danger and called to defend freedom*” and then he added that “all of this *was brought upon us* in a single day -- and night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack [emphasis added].” Following a familiar script, President G.W. Bush portrayed the United States as a naïve nation unaware of the dangers of the world, firmly committed to defend freedom, and unwilling to intervene outside its borders unless wickedly provoked.<sup>113</sup>

The myth of US innocence in world affairs is also kept alive by the mainstream national press. The interpretation of Islamic resentment toward the United States is a case in point. Journalists Charles Krauthammer and Thomas Friedman on the columns of the authoritative *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* write that Islamic hatred toward the United States has a fundamentally irrational nature. They argue that it would be difficult to explain the existence of Islamic hatred otherwise, given that during the last decades the United States “has been largely dedicated to rescuing Muslims or trying to help them free from tyranny.” The same argument is made by Middle East expert Barry Rubin. In the authoritative journal *Foreign Affairs*, Rubin states that “Arab and Muslim hatred of the United States is not just, or even mainly, a response to actual US policies – policies that, if anything, have been remarkably pro-Arab and pro-Muslim over the years.” These interpretations describe hard-feelings by Muslim communities toward the United States as generally

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<sup>112</sup> Bill Clinton, “A New Covenant for American Security: Remarks to Students at Georgetown University,” December 12, 1991, [http://www.dlc.org/ndol\\_ci.cfm?kaid=128&subid=174&contentid=250537](http://www.dlc.org/ndol_ci.cfm?kaid=128&subid=174&contentid=250537).

<sup>113</sup> George W. Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of the US Congress 2001,” September 20, 2001, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911jointsessionspeech.htm>.

having irrational or instrumental motives. By dismissing the existence of active US responsibilities in originating such hard-feelings, the mainstream national press helps to perpetuate the myth of US innocence.<sup>114</sup>

The world of academia in the United States is not immune to the appeal of the narrative of innocence either. Common expressions such as “benevolent hegemon”, “reluctant superpower”, and “virtuous empire”, often used to refer to the global role of the United States in the post-Cold War world, rest on the underlying assumption of US innocence in foreign policy. Let us consider three especially illustrative examples. In 1998, at the height of unipolarity, historian Robert Kagan writes in the influential magazine *Foreign Policy*, “the truth is that the benevolent hegemony exercised by the United States is good for a vast portion of the world’s population” and “if there is to be a sole superpower, the world is better off if that power is the United States.” In his article, Kagan concedes that “Americans are as self-interested as any other people,” but he also clarifies that US self-interest is a kind of “enlightened self-interest that, in practice, comes dangerously close to resembling generosity.” Another historian, Ernest May, highlights the “reluctant” nature of US power when he argues that “some nations achieve greatness [...] the United States had greatness thrust upon it.” Finally, in one of her works, professor Joan Hoff takes issue with other scholars who describe the United States as a virtuous empire whose policies are fundamentally “benign and liberal”.<sup>115</sup>

Along with politicians, journalists, and academics, also ordinary US citizens appear to share the belief in the innocent nature of US foreign policy. As maintained by a 2010 survey poll, 60 percent of Americans agreed with the statement that the United States was “generally disliked” by foreign peoples. However, they evidently did not link “foreign dislike” to US behavior, insofar as 76 percent of the same respondents also believed, quite contrary to the view of most people in other countries, that US policymakers were paying attention to the interests of other nations in framing its foreign policy.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Charles Krauthammer, “To Hell With Sympathy,” *Time*, November 9, 2003; Thomas L. Friedman, “America Vs. The Narrative,” *The New York Times*, November 28, 2009; Barry Rubin, “The Real Roots of Arab Anti-Americanism,” *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 6 (December 2002): 73.

<sup>115</sup> Works providing analyses of these images of the United States include Bacevich, *American Empire*; Dinesh D’Souza, “In Praise of an American Empire,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 26, 2002; John B. Foster, “Imperial America and War,” *Monthly Review* 55, no. 1 (May 27, 2003), <http://monthlyreview.org/2003/05/01/imperial-america-and-war>; Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy*, 14–15; Robert Kagan, “The Benevolent Empire,” *Foreign Policy* 111 (Summer 1998): 24–35; Ernest R. May, *Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of America as a Great Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), 270.

<sup>116</sup> Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Obama More Popular Abroad Than at Home, Global Image of U.S. Continues to Benefit* (Pew Research Center, June 17, 2010), <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2011/04/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Spring-2010-Report2.pdf>. China, India, Kenya, Nigeria and Brazil represented exceptions to this trend in so far majorities there

How do we explain the remarkable resilience of the US myth of national innocence in foreign policy in spite of historical evidence of the contrary? Scholars who investigated the topic provide a number of interesting answers.<sup>117</sup>

According to historian Reinhold Niebuhr, “the powers of human self-deception are seemingly endless.” As a consequence, Americans find it hard “to believe that anyone could think ill of [them],” since Americans are deeply convinced that their “society is so essentially virtuous that only malice could prompt criticism of any of [their] actions.” Academic John Mearsheimer makes a similar point when he argues that, because liberal values are so deeply rooted in US culture, Americans “find it easy to believe that they are acting according to cherished principles, rather than cold and calculated power considerations.” Moreover, scholar Robert Kagan maintains that “deeply rooted republicanism”, “enlightenment liberalism”, “religious conscience”, and “democratic worldview” make Americans reluctant to see themselves as others see them. Instead, according to Kagan, Americans prefer to construct “more comforting narratives” of their past or to create “idealized foreign policies” against which to measure their present behavior. It seems as if the power of and the general consensus about deep-seated and time-honored national images of exceptionalism and innocence have allowed Americans to repeatedly overlook the existence of tensions between the foreign policies their country has undertaken and the values it has publicly professed to stand for.<sup>118</sup>

Stephen Gallagher, an American philosopher, identifies some common techniques through which the United States has been able to perpetuate its myth of national innocence.<sup>119</sup>

A first technique is “unadulterated denial”. Unwelcome information is simply considered not true. In 2002, US Secretary of Defense Ronald Rumsfeld dismissed alleged charges over mistreatments of detainees held in custody at the Guantanamo Bay facility as “just plain false” and “just utter nonsense”. Secretary Rumsfeld declared that “no detainee has been mistreated in any way. No detainee has been harmed.” Later reports by authoritative sources as diverse as the International

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answered positively to the question “whether the USA takes into consideration other countries’ interests in making international policy decisions.”

<sup>117</sup> On the existence of a mismatch between US foreign policy practice and US foreign policy rhetoric see: Johnson, *Blowback, Second Edition: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*; Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy*; Kagan, “Cowboy Nation”; Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950*; Kinzer, *Overthrow: America’s Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*; Mearsheimer, “Liberal Talk, Realist Thinking”; Hans Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951); Claes G. Ryn, *America The Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and The Quest For Empire* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction, 2003); Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*.

<sup>118</sup> Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, 21; *ibid.*, 24–25; Mearsheimer, “Liberal Talk, Realist Thinking”; Kagan, “Cowboy Nation.”

<sup>119</sup> Stephen J. Gallagher, “Forget Guantanamo,” *Monthly Review* 59, no. 10 (March 2008): 8–13.

Committee of the Red Cross and the US Federal Bureau of Investigation instead gave substance to the charges of mistreatment. Additionally, in a fashion reminding of the famous George Orwell's *Newspeak*, post-9/11 practices widely considered torture (as for example water-boarding<sup>120</sup>) were called with the much more reassuring name "enhanced interrogation techniques".<sup>121</sup>

Another technique consists in denying "the reality of the victim as a victim". This technique implies a process of dehumanization of the enemy who, having lost its status of human being, can be subjected to abuse. During the Philippine War (1899), the infamous "Balangiga massacre" and the systematic use of torture carried out by US troops against the Filipinos was largely possible because the enemy was described as "little better than a dog, noisome reptile in some instances, whose best disposition was the rubbish heap." Half a century later, during WWII, a similar process of dehumanization offered a sort of justification for President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066; an order that called for the indiscriminate internment of more than 110,000 individuals of Japanese descent living within the continental United States. As maintained by writer John Dower, Japanese were alternatively dubbed "subhuman, inhuman, lesser human, superhuman –all that was lacking in the perception of the Japanese enemy was a human like oneself."<sup>122</sup>

After that, there is the technique of "accusing the accuser". People who question US policies are either malevolent, biased or dupes. Even when coming from presumably friendly countries, such as its European allies, criticism of the United States is generally considered irrational and mainly inspired by envy of US power and wealth.<sup>123</sup>

A fourth technique is the "denial of responsibility": wrong actions or inactions are the responsibility of "a few bad apples" or are required by extraordinary circumstances. Shameful incidents like the abuses perpetrated on the inmates of the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, the discovery of random

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<sup>120</sup> Water-boarding is an interrogation practice used to coerce prisoners by employing water to cut off oxygen and to create both the fear and feeling of drowning.

<sup>121</sup> Richard Sisk, "Rumsfeld Rips Guantanamo Critics," *NYDailyNews.com*, January 22, 2002, [http://articles.nydailynews.com/2002-01-23/news/18198253\\_1\\_prisoners-defense-secretary-donald-rumsfeld-unlawful-combatants](http://articles.nydailynews.com/2002-01-23/news/18198253_1_prisoners-defense-secretary-donald-rumsfeld-unlawful-combatants); Neil A. Lewis, "Red Cross Finds Detainee Abuse in Guantánamo," *The New York Times*, November 30, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/30/politics/30gitmo.html?scp=1&sq=Tantamount%20to%20torture&st=cse>; Mark Tran, "Fbi Files Detail Guantánamo Torture Tactics," *The Guardian*, January 3, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/jan/03/guantanamo.usa>; Scott Shane and Charlie Savage, "Bin Laden Raid Revives Debate on Value of Torture," *The New York Times*, May 3, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/04/us/politics/04torture.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/04/us/politics/04torture.html?_r=2).

<sup>122</sup> Article from the newspaper Philadelphia Ledger quoted in Fred Poole and Max Vanzi, *Revolution in the Philippines: The United States in a Hall of Cracked Mirrors* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), 180; John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 9.

<sup>123</sup> Inderjeet Parmar, "Obama, Wikileaks, and American Power," in *Obama and the World*, ed. Inderjeet Parmar, Linda Miller, and Mark Ledwidge, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014); Dinesh D'Souza, *What's So Great About America* (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing Inc., 2002); Joshua Muravchik, "The European Disease: An Irrational Anti-Americanism Has Taken Root Across the Atlantic," *The American Enterprise*, December 2002.

killings of Afghan civilians for sport, or the desecration of Taliban corpses in Afghanistan are generally explained as the responsibility of a few bad apples.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, the US officer charged with ordering the so-called Haditha killings in Iraq (where 24 civilians, including women and children, were indiscriminately killed) eventually avoided a jail term. At the trial, the US officer pleaded guilty of ordering his squad “to shoot first and ask questions later”, but he justified his order by saying that he did so because he had perceived a serious threat and had intended to eliminate that threat in order to keep his Marines alive. Such incidents involving US military personnel are strongly condemned by US authorities. However, they are also easily forgotten and the myth about the exceptional goodness of the US soldier quickly restored.<sup>125</sup>

Finally, a last technique is to “appeal to higher loyalties”. The pursuit of higher goods permits or even demands for the use of questionable or blatantly wrong means. Accordingly, US President G.W. Bush defended the use of harsh interrogation techniques (widely considered torture) by arguing that such techniques were necessary to collect intelligence indispensable to protect US citizens against future terrorist attacks.<sup>126</sup>

## Final Remarks

This chapter has dealt with the first essential component of US foreign policy under analysis: US foreign policy rhetoric. We have begun with an analysis of the reasons why studying a country’s public rhetoric is important for having a comprehensive understanding of its foreign policy. After that, the chapter has provided a detailed examination of the idea of US exceptionalism and the

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<sup>124</sup> Some observers doubt this and suggest instead that what occurred, for example, at Abu Ghraib was part of a broader set of practices deemed permissible by high ranking members of the US government, see James Ross, “Black Letter Abuse: The US Legal Response to Torture Since 9/11,” *International Review of the Red Cross*, no. 867 (September 30, 2007), <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/article/review/review-867-p561.htm>; Cases of such reprehensible acts make the news and are weighed very heavily mainly because there is an implicit expectation in the public that the United States should behave according to the high standards that are set by its own lofty foreign policy rhetoric. For descriptions of the three previous example see respectively: Seymour M. Hersh, “Torture at Abu Ghraib American Soldiers Brutalized Iraqis. How Far up Does the Responsibility Go?,” *The New Yorker*, May 10, 2004; Craig Whitlock, “Members of Stryker Combat Brigade in Afghanistan Accused of Killing Civilians for Sport,” *The Washington Post*, September 18, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/18/AR2010091803935.html?sid=ST2010091803942>; Craig Whitlock, “Panetta: Apparent Marine Desecration of Taliban Corpses Is ‘utterly Deplorable,’” *The Washington Post*, January 12, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/checkpoint-washington/post/us-military-karzai-strongly-condemn-apparent-marine-desecration-of-taliban-corpses/2012/01/12/gIQADTmDtP\\_blog.html?hpid=z1](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/checkpoint-washington/post/us-military-karzai-strongly-condemn-apparent-marine-desecration-of-taliban-corpses/2012/01/12/gIQADTmDtP_blog.html?hpid=z1).

<sup>125</sup> Julie Watson, “Haditha Killings: Frank Wuterich, Convicted In Killings Of Iraqi Citizens, Escapes Jail Time,” *Huffington Post*, January 24, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/25/haditha-killings-frank-wuterich-iraq\\_n\\_1230889.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/25/haditha-killings-frank-wuterich-iraq_n_1230889.html).

<sup>126</sup> Steven L Myers, “Veto of Bill on C.I.A. Tactics Affirms Bush’s Legacy,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/09/washington/09policy.html>.

significant influence that such a powerful idea has exerted over the centuries on the predominant brand of US public rhetoric. We have then moved to discuss the two major strategies that have been competing for relevance in US foreign policy: the “lead by example” and the “lead by action” strategies. The chapter has ended with a study of the myth of US innocence, that is the national narrative commonly used to frame the actions of the United States in the international arena.

## US Foreign Policy Practice

In this chapter we address the second fundamental component of US foreign policy; that is US foreign policy practice. To begin with, we discuss the actors and dynamics involved in the complex process of US foreign policymaking. After that, we study the concept of the US national interest and categorize its components into three different clusters. Finally, we provide an analysis of the core national interests that have characterized US foreign policy toward the region of the Greater Middle East since World War II.

### The Process of US Foreign Policymaking

In order to understand US foreign policy practice it is essential to analyze the dynamics surrounding the process of US foreign policymaking.<sup>127</sup>

Even a strenuous advocate of the primacy of systemic factors, as political scientist Kenneth Waltz, seems to acknowledge this reality when he writes,

*“the third image [the international level] describes the framework of world politics, but without the first and second images [the individual and the domestic levels] there can be no knowledge of the forces that determine policy; the first and second image describe the forces in world politics, but without the third image it is impossible to assess their importance or predict their results.”*<sup>128</sup>

Thomas Christensen, a neoclassical realist, concedes that the fundamental aspects of IR theories “are simple and generalizable across cultures and political systems”, however, “the application of the approach to any given country requires a great deal of knowledge about the nation in question.” Foreign policy analyst Valerie Hudson goes so far as to say that “[t]he process of foreign policymaking [i]s at least as important, if not more important, than foreign policy as an output.” Therefore, researchers interested in studying the foreign policy of a specific country or group of countries should acquire a good knowledge of how these countries’ domestic political dynamics

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<sup>127</sup> The following analysis of the process of foreign policymaking in the United States is based on information drawn from a number of books including: James E. Anderson, *Public Policymaking: An Introduction* (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010); Kent M. Bolton, *U.S. National Security and Foreign Policymaking After 9/11: Present at the Re-Creation* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008); Clarke E. Cochran et al., *American Public Policy: An Introduction* (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2011); Rosati and Scott, *The Politics of United States Foreign Policy*; Bruce Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy*, Fifth Edition (New York: Norton & Company, 2014).

<sup>128</sup> Waltz, *Man, the State and War*, 238.



work, both in theory and in practice. In this sense, understanding the particular process of foreign policymaking of a country becomes critical.<sup>129</sup>

So, what are the principal actors involved in the process of US foreign policymaking? Any serious attempt to answer to this question cannot downplay the role of the President and the Executive branch over which he presides. Regarding US foreign policy, along with the president, the most directly involved actors within the Executive are the National Security Council, the State Department, the Defense Department, and the various agencies forming the intelligence community.<sup>130</sup>

As far as issues of foreign policy and war are concerned, the President is endowed with significant powers. Some of these powers are explicitly granted by the US Constitution, namely by article two, section two:

*“The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States [...] He shall have Power, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, to make Treaties [...] and he shall nominate, and by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, shall appoint Ambassadors, other public Ministers and Consuls.”*<sup>131</sup>

Other presidential powers, called semi-constitutional powers, were added throughout US history as a consequence of the increasing number of commitments and responsibilities of the United States on the world stage. For example, during the Cold War, US presidents started the practice of conducting covert and overt military operations abroad without asking for congressional approval (as instead required by the US Constitution). Kennedy’s Bay of Pigs in Cuba, Johnson’s progressive deployment of US troops in Vietnam, and Nixon’s cover-up of the US secret bombings in Laos and Cambodia are cases in point. In addition to these constitutional and semi-constitutional powers, the role of the US president in foreign policy could vary depending on his or her personality, distinctive set of beliefs, particular training, and personal interest in foreign affairs. Notably, when the country faces situations of severe crisis, it is usually the president, as the commander in chief, who eventually takes responsibility for difficult decisions.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 248; Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 17.

<sup>130</sup> Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy*.

<sup>131</sup> “US Constitution,” 1787, [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_transcript.html).

<sup>132</sup> Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy*; Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 38–39.

Despite his or her significant powers, the President does not operate in a vacuum. He or she represents one actor in a wide and complex democratic political system where power is shared with other actors. The US Congress, and in particular the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, have crucial responsibilities for matters of foreign policy. According to the US Constitution, article one, the US Congress is vested with the power to declare war, to raise and support armies, and to provide and maintain a navy. Under specific circumstances the 1973 War Powers Resolution<sup>133</sup> allows the President to bypass the Congress and to unilaterally commit US troops abroad. Nevertheless, the resolution explicitly requires the President to inform the Congress of such a decision and it temporally limits any military intervention started without congressional approval to no more than 60 days (with a possible extension of other 30 days). Additionally, the US Congress also has the prerogative to control the appropriations process for the US federal budget (the so-called power of the purse) that includes control over both the defense and the foreign affairs budgets. Moreover, the Senate's approval is necessary to validate some presidential decisions such as the signing of international treaties or the appointment of ambassadors and other public ministers. Furthermore, the President does not operate from scratch. Very often, he or she has to come to terms with foreign policies that are legacies of previous administrations and that may or may not limit the incumbent President's policy options. All that considered, the fact that the United States is a democracy, and a federal one, puts several constraints on presidential action. It may be quite correct to say that a leader of an authoritarian regime has more ability to carry out drastic changes in foreign policy than his or her counterpart in a sound democracy, insofar as the power of the former is presumably limited by fewer domestic political constraints.<sup>134</sup>

Along with providing "checks and balances" to the power of the Executive, the nature of the US political system (that of being an open and pluralistic democracy) gives the possibility to a large number of actors with different interests to get involved in the process of policymaking. An all but complete list of the domestic actors that have a stake in US foreign policy should contain both institutional actors, such as the President, the State Department, the Defense Department, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Congress, the Supreme Court and other governmental agencies, and also representatives of the US society, such as economic, military, ethnic, religious or environmental

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<sup>133</sup> The War Power Resolution was in part a response by the US Congress to President Richard Nixon's secret military campaigns in South East Asia. "War Powers Resolution," 1973, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/51612751/The-WAR-POWERS-Resolution-of-1973-Text-and-Records-From-Congress>.

<sup>134</sup> CQ Press, *The Middle East* (Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc, 2007), 163; Wittkopf and McCormick, *The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy*; Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*, 43–54.

special-interest groups, and the media. Of course, not all actors have the same authority or the same resources, and are thus capable of exerting the same influence on a specific policy. However, the nature of the US policymaking process and of US institutions provides even relatively weaker actors with the opportunity of finding alternative ways to make their voice heard and of trying to influence the process during its different phases. For example, if a lobbyist for a human rights group has no direct access to the President or to one of the top officials of the Cabinet, he or she could always try to contact a member of the Congress. Otherwise, if the same lobbyist failed to achieve his or her group's goals during the agenda setting or the decision-making phases, he or she could still try to influence the outcome of the policymaking process during the implementation phase by co-opting members of the bureaucratic and administrative staff. In other words, openness, plurality, constitutional checks and balances, and a system of different political majorities within the Legislative and the Executive branches of the Federal Government make it difficult for a single viewpoint to completely control every phase of this very complex process. With this in mind, we believe that an analytical model which considers foreign policy as the result of decisions taken by a unitary rational actor inevitably overlooks the critical internal dynamics that occur before these decisions are eventually agreed upon. A more accurate analysis should take into consideration the insights provided by the work of political scientist Graham Allison. Allison offers alternative analytical models that shed more light on the internal dynamics leading to foreign policy decisions. We find Allison's Bureaucratic Politics model especially suitable to understand important aspects of the process of US foreign policymaking. First, the Bureaucratic Politics model describes foreign policy decisions as outcomes of a game of bargaining among different actors bearers of varying preferences, abilities, standard operating procedures, and positions of power. Second, Allison's model acknowledges that the process of foreign policymaking does not necessarily privilege expert or rational decisions, therefore leaving the door open to the possibility of suboptimal policy outcomes.<sup>135</sup>

The national process of foreign policymaking can also be susceptible to the influence of various international and foreign actors. Such international and foreign actors include other nation states, international governmental organizations (i.e. the United Nations or the International Monetary Fund), international non-governmental organizations (i.e. Amnesty International or Greenpeace), and a panoply of very different economic, political, militant, and cultural transnational forces and actors (i.e. multinational corporations, international terrorist groups, the Roman Catholic Church, international law, the global market, and globalization, to name only a few). It is important to

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<sup>135</sup> John Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Graham Allison, "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *The American Political Science Review* 63, no. 3 (1969): 689–718.

remember, however, that although international and foreign actors can play a role during the domestic process of policymaking, they do not have the power to take decisions for any sovereign state.<sup>136</sup>

Some practical examples may help to understand the way international and foreign actors may influence a country's foreign policy. The first example illustrates the case of another state's national interest limiting US foreign policy options. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union, led by General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, considered Eastern Europe as an exclusive area of Soviet influence. This Soviet policy, often dubbed Brezhnev Doctrine, eliminated in practice any real possibility of a US direct intervention in support of popular reformist uprisings both in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968. The second example looks at issues of international commerce. The World Trade Organization is an international governmental organization whose main task is to supervise and liberalize international trade. The decisions adopted in this international forum have the effect of meaningfully reducing the ability of its members, including the United States, to adopt protectionist policies. The third example discusses the intertwined concepts of international law and of the international legitimacy derived from abiding by it. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 is a case in point. Before the onset of the war, the United States tried to secure an authorization by the United Nations Security Council for a military intervention. When they did not get such an authorization, US officials went on with their own plans anyway. However, soon after the invasion, the United States invested significant diplomatic capital to obtain an *a posteriori* international legitimization for the intervention from the United Nations through the approval of successive UN Security Council resolutions, as UNSCR 1511 (October 16, 2003) and UNSCR 1546 (June 8, 2004). These examples confirm academic Christopher Hill's conclusion that the ability of a state "to exercise the independent choices implied by sovereignty is often in practice curtailed, while [its] power varies widely and is never absolute."<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> On the role of international and non-state actors see Charles W. Kegley and Shannon L. Blanton, *World Politics: Trend and Transformation, 2010 - 2011 Edition* (Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010); National Intelligence Council, *Nonstate Actors: Impact on International Relations and Implications for the United States*, August 2007, [http://www.dni.gov/nic/confreports\\_nonstate\\_actors.html](http://www.dni.gov/nic/confreports_nonstate_actors.html).

<sup>137</sup> UN Security Council, "Resolution 1511," October 16, 2003, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N03/563/91/PDF/N0356391.pdf?OpenElement>. In Resolution 1511 (2003) the UN Security Council "underscores... the temporary nature of the exercise by the Coalition Provisional Authority (Authority) of the specific responsibilities, authorities, and obligations under applicable international law"; UN Security Council, "Resolution 1546," June 8, 2004, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N04/381/16/PDF/N0438116.pdf?OpenElement>. In Resolution 1546 (2004) the UN Security Council welcomed "the beginning of a new phase in Iraq's transition to a democratically elected government, and look(ed) forward to the end of the occupation and the assumption of full responsibility and authority by a fully sovereign and independent Interim Government of Iraq"; Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy*, 31.

The relationship between the external environment and domestic actors is effectively described in the words of scholar Valerie Hudson:

*“If we consider the metaphor of foreign policy as a drama, then the actual humans and human collectivities involved in foreign policy decision making are the actors, and the core of foreign policy analysis provides situational motivations, understandings, and processes. But this drama is taking place on a stage, and the stage sets some parameters to any drama enacted upon it. Certain types of actions by human actors become more or less likely depending upon the layout of the stage and its props.”*<sup>138</sup>

In other words, very often national leaders have to adapt to or to force their own national interest and foreign policy upon the limits and the opportunities set by the international system, in terms of both the distribution of relative power capabilities and of other international and foreign actors’ interests and behaviors. Although international factors do not account for all aspects of a country’s foreign policy, they can define its general outline. As argued by Christopher Hill, national policymakers always have choices, although in “many circumstances the dice are heavily loaded in one direction or another.” Paraphrasing an example used by scholar Gideon Rose, systemic factors can make us go to an Italian restaurant instead of a Japanese one, however, they cannot make us eat *pasta* instead of *pizza*, or drink *Prosecco* instead of *Chianti*. The final choice rests on human decision-makers.<sup>139</sup>

All that considered, the answer to our first question goes as follows. The US process of foreign policymaking includes the participation of and the bargaining among a variety of different actors both institutional and representative of the wider society, both domestic and external. Nevertheless, the President of the United States and the Executive branch play a pivotal role in taking the final decisions. Decisions taken at the domestic level, however, are inevitably constrained or eased by the limits and the opportunities set by the evolving nature of international politics. Given that the Executive branch is arguably the branch of the US Government most deeply and persistently involved in framing the foreign policy of the United States, we decided to use the White House, the Department of State, and the Department of Defense as our primary policymaking analytical group. Therefore, throughout our analysis of US foreign policy toward the Greater Middle East, we pay special attention to the interests, perspectives, and reactions to events in the region expressed by officials affiliated to these three distinct US government institutions.

<sup>138</sup> Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 43.

<sup>139</sup> Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy*, 29; Rose, “Review: Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” in particular p.147.

## The US National Interest

In this section of the chapter, we address the following question: what is commonly considered the US national interest in foreign policy? In 1996, the Commission on America's National Interests declares that “national interests are the fundamental building blocks in any discussion of foreign policy.” Academic Gideon Rose writes that a state’s national interest in foreign policy consists of “the goals or preferences that guide the country’s external behavior.” These two definitions emphasize the connection existing between a country’s national interest and its foreign policy. Moreover, international relations theorist Joseph Nye Jr. maintains that, in a democracy like the United States, “the national interest is simply the set of shared priorities regarding relations with the rest of the world. It is broader than strategic interests [and] The American people clearly think that their interests include certain values and their promotion abroad.” Similarly, academic Samuel Huntington suggests that “National interests usually combine security and material concerns, on the one hand, and moral and ethical concerns, on the other.” Nye’s and Huntington’s definitions highlight the complex nature of the national interest and argue that it includes a number of different concerns.<sup>140</sup>

A practical example can perhaps further clarify the concept of the national interest with regard to US foreign policy. Former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice once wrote that the US national interest should be:

*“to ensure that America's military can deter war, project power, and fight in defense of its interests if deterrence fails; to promote economic growth and political openness by extending free trade and a stable international monetary system to all committed to these principles, including in the Western Hemisphere, which has too often been neglected as a vital area of U.S. national interest; to renew strong and intimate relationships with allies who share American values and can thus share the burden of promoting peace, prosperity, and freedom; to focus U.S. energies on comprehensive relationships with the big powers, particularly Russia and China, that can and will mold the character of the international political system; to deal decisively with the threat of rogue regimes and hostile powers, which is increasingly*

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<sup>140</sup> The Commission on America’s National Interests, “America’s National Interests,” 1996, 13, [http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/americas\\_interests.pdf](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/americas_interests.pdf); Rose, “Review: Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” 152; Joseph S. Nye, “Redefining the National Interest,” *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 4 (August 1999), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/55209/joseph-s-nye-jr/redefining-the-national-interest>; Samuel P. Huntington, “The Erosion of American National Interest,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 5 (October 1997): 35.

*taking the forms of the potential for terrorism and the development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).*”<sup>141</sup>

As the above excerpt shows, the national interest of the United States can combine a large number of diverse concerns. Moreover, “national interests are not absolutes.” Some of them, such as the defense of US soil from foreign attack or the protection of US citizens at home and abroad, certainly enjoy almost universal support. Others, conversely, may only represent what the incumbent administration perceives as the current most pressing concerns. As for example, the Barack Obama administration’s decision in 2009 for a marked “pivot”, or reorientation, of US foreign policy toward the region of the Asia-Pacific. The national interest may also be determined by unexpected –or Black Swan- events that have the power to alter an administration’s previous priorities. The implications of the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States are a case in point. The attacks, in fact, suddenly elevated previously neglected Afghanistan to a top priority in the foreign policy agenda of the George W. Bush administration.<sup>142</sup>

Drawing on Nye’s and Huntington’s definitions about the multifaceted nature of the national interest, we identify three main different clusters of interests within the broader national interest of the United States. We call them: realist, socio-economic, and ideal interests. Common realist interests include US foreign policies aimed at pursuing self-help, granting the country’s survival, increasing its security, and extending its international influence. Socio-economic interests, instead, provide evidence about the importance for the United States of foreign policies that prioritize mainly economic and commercial concerns. Finally, ideal interests generally refer to US foreign policies that promotes its national ideology, defined here as a coherent and organic system of beliefs, symbols, and values.<sup>143</sup>

<sup>141</sup> Condoleezza Rice, “Promoting the National Interest,” *Foreign Policy*, February 2000, 46–47.

<sup>142</sup> Fulton T. Armstrong, “Ways To Make Analysis Relevant But Not Prescriptive,” *Studies In Intelligence* 46, no. 3 (2002), <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol46no3/article05.html>; Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (UK: Random House Inc, 2010).

<sup>143</sup> The relevance of “realist” interests in US foreign policy has been highlighted in the works of George Kennan, *American Diplomacy, Expanded Edition* (University of Chicago Press, 1984); Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994); John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001); Hans Morgenthau, *In Defense of The National Interest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951); For works focusing on the “socio-economic” component of the US national interest refer to Charles Beard, *American Government and Politics* (New York: MacMillan, 1914); David Horowitz, *From Yalta to Vietnam: American Foreign Policy in the Cold War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967); Kolko, *The Roots of American Foreign Policy; an Analysis of Power and Purpose*; Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*; For this particular definition of ideology see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books Classics, 1973); For an analysis of US “ideal” interests refer to Richard Crockatt, *The Fifty Years War: The United States in World Politics, 1941-1991* (London: Routledge, 1995); Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy*; Richard Ned Lebow, “The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the

Going back to the previous excerpt by Condoleezza Rice, we find empirical evidence of all the three different clusters of interests.

Realist interests emerge when Rice points out the necessity “to ensure that America’s military can deter war, project power, and fight in defense of its interests if deterrence fails;” and then, when she suggests “to focus U.S. energies on comprehensive relationships with the big powers [...] that can and will mold the character of the international political system.” The military, power projection, defense, and big powers are all buzzwords in the long tradition of *realpolitik*. The term *realpolitik* was coined by the German writer Ludwig von Rochau in the XIX century and it is usually associated with the politics of the Austrian diplomat Klemens von Metternich and the Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. *Realpolitik* generally refers to an approach in foreign policy that gives preeminence to pragmatism and realism over moralism and idealism. In the specific case of the United States, the foreign policy under Secretary of State Henry Kissinger is generally considered an example of US *realpolitik*.<sup>144</sup>

We detect socio-economic interests in the part of Rice’s excerpt where she stresses the goal “to promote economic growth and political openness by extending free trade and a stable international monetary system to all committed to these principles.” Here, Rice is reaffirming the US commitment to the Open Door policy, that is to the perceived need for a “continued expansion” beyond the country’s limits and borders. The importance of such a need for expansion rests upon two time-honored assumptions: the Frontier Thesis and the Either-Or Thesis. The first assumption draws on the work of XIX century historian Frederick J. Turner about the importance of the frontier for the US society. The frontier, in fact, has a double function: as a gate of escape from existing responsibilities and as a means to externalize domestic problems. The second assumption holds that democracy and prosperity at home are inextricably dependent on continued economic expansion abroad. According to historian William Appleman Williams, US expansion abroad “provided the *sine qua non* of domestic prosperity and social peace.” This latter assumption seems to be influenced by the Marxist concern about the potential destabilizing effects on domestic society deriving from agricultural and/or industrial overproduction.<sup>145</sup>

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Failure of Realism,” *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1994): 249–77; Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, “Origins of the Cold War,” *Foreign Affairs* 46, no. 2 (October 1967): 22–52.

<sup>144</sup> Federico Troceni, *L’invenzione Della Realpolitik E La Scoperta Della Legge Del Potere. August Ludwig von Rochau Tra Radicalismo E Nazionale-Liberalismo* (Bologna: Mulino, 2009); Kaplan, “Kissinger, Metternich, and Realism.”

<sup>145</sup> Frederick J. Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (American Historical Association, Chicago, 1893); William A. Williams, *The Contours of American History* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1961), 355.



Finally, ideal interests come to the fore when Secretary Rice emphasizes the necessity for renewing “strong and intimate relationships with allies who share American values and can thus share the burden of promoting peace, prosperity, and freedom.” Rice’s words illustrate that US ideal interests are those US interests more in line with the traditional themes of national exceptionalism and innocence so frequent in US foreign policy rhetoric.

A survey of the US National Security Strategy documents of the past decades can also provide empirical evidence about the persistence and relevance throughout history of the realist, socio-economic, and ideal components of the US national interest. The National Security Strategy (NSS) is a document periodically prepared by the US Government for the US Congress. Its legal bases are in section 603 of the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Department Reorganization Act of 1986.<sup>146</sup>

The act defines the NSS as:

*“A comprehensive description and discussion of the foreign policy worldwide commitments and national defense capabilities of the United States; the proposed short-term and long-term uses of the elements of national power required to protect and promote the interests and achieve the stated goals and objectives; and to provide an assessment of the capabilities of the United States to implement its national security strategy.”*<sup>147</sup>

In other words, the NSS is probably the best place to find valuable information about what is considered the official US national interest and the proposed US foreign policies aimed at pursuing it. Let us analyze four past NSS documents to look for evidence of the above clusters of interests. Two of these NSS documents were prepared by Republican administrations (NSS 1991 and NSS 2006) while two others were written by Democratic administrations (NSS 1999 and NSS 2010).

The NSS 1991 by the George H.W. Bush administration, points out the vital importance of the “survival of the United States”, and of the defense of its freedom and independence (realist interest); it then continues by saying that the United States seeks to “ensure access to foreign markets” and to “promote an open and expanding international economic system, based on market principles” (socio-economic interest); finally, the NSS 1991 calls for a US effort to “strengthen and

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<sup>146</sup> The first National Security Strategy of the United States document was published in 1988 under US President Ronald Reagan.

<sup>147</sup> Quoted in: “U.S. National Security Strategy 2010,” *The National Strategy Forum Review* 19, no. 1 (Winter 2009).

enlarge the commonwealth of free nations that share a commitment to democracy and individual rights” (ideal interest).<sup>148</sup>

The Bill Clinton administration, in its NSS 1999, highlights three core objectives: “to enhance America’s security” and ability to defend itself (realist interest); “to bolster America’s economic prosperity” by advancing an open international trading system (socio-economic interest); and “to promote democracy and human rights abroad” (ideal interest).<sup>149</sup>

In 2006, the NSS prepared by the George W. Bush administration reaffirms the necessity “to provide enduring security for the American people” (realist interest); to “ignite a new era of global economic growth through free markets and free trade” (socio-economic interest); to “champion aspirations for human dignity” and to build “the infrastructure of democracy” (ideal interest).<sup>150</sup>

Finally, the NSS 2010 by the Barack Obama administration is a document divided in three main sections. Their respective titles read: “Security” of the United States (realist interest); “Prosperity” through a strong, innovative, and growing US economy in an open international economic system (socio-economic interest); and “Values” and their respect at home and around the world (ideal interest).<sup>151</sup>

This brief survey of four distinct National Security Strategy documents confirms that realist, socio-economic, and ideal interests have consistently been essential parts of the national interest of the United States. The four NSS documents also show the “national”, and not only “partisan”, nature of these realist, socio-economic, and ideal concerns, insofar as both Republican and Democratic administrations have described them, in almost identical terms, as primary components of the country’s national interest.

Since US foreign policy in the Greater Middle East has usually offered examples of conflict between realist and socio-economic interests, on one side, and ideal interests, on the other, we decided to group the first two clusters of national interests (realist and socio-economic) together and call them strategic interests. Such a categorization does not only facilitate our research goal of highlighting the existence, in the “practice” of US foreign policy, of tensions between different

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<sup>148</sup> George H.W. Bush, “The National Security Strategy of the United States 1991,” 1991, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/national/nss-918015.htm>.

<sup>149</sup> Bill Clinton, “The National Security Strategy of the United States 1999,” December 1999, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/nss/nssr-1299.pdf>.

<sup>150</sup> George W. Bush, “The National Security Strategy of the United States 2006,” March 16, 2006, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2006/>.

<sup>151</sup> Obama, “The National Security Strategy of the United States 2010.”

national interests but it also improves our ability to detect instances of mismatch between US foreign policy practice and US foreign policy rhetoric. In fact, we maintain that mainstream US public rhetoric closely mirrors traditional US ideal interests. Therefore, a conflict between US ideal and US strategic interests is also very likely to result in a mismatch between US rhetoric and US practice in foreign policy.

That said, let us go back to our original question about what it is commonly considered the US national interest. Broadly speaking, we can define the national interest of a state in foreign policy as what national policymakers and the wider society deem to be essential to protect and promote fundamental aspects of their way of life with regard to the state's relations with the rest of the world. In the specific case of the United States, we contend that such "fundamental aspects" should necessarily reflect both the country's realist and socio-economic interests (together referred to as strategic interests), and ideal interests. Other scholars of US foreign policy share our position. Robert Kelley, for instance, maintains that "we [...] understand that the energies which release themselves in public life are emotional as well as rational, cultural and ideological as well as economic and pragmatic" and, therefore, "there is necessarily an intermixture of influences in public life" that participates in the definition of the concept of the national interest.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*; Kelley, "Ideology and Political Culture from Jefferson to Nixon," 531; *ibid.*, 532.

## **US Foreign Policy Practice toward the Greater Middle East since WWII**

In the previous two sections of this chapter, we have discussed the broad issues of the process of US foreign policymaking and of the US national interest. In this third section, we specifically turn our attention to the practice of US foreign policy toward the Greater Middle East. In particular, we provide a historical overview of the US Middle East policy since World War II, the time when the United States officially became a major player in the region. The main purpose of this section is to highlight the existence and describe the development of a number of US core national interests that have systematically influenced the decisions of US policymakers with regard to the Greater Middle East. We identify four distinct but interrelated US national interests: access to Middle Eastern energy resources, containment of hostile powers, policies to counter terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the special relationship with Israel. According to our previous categorization, such interests go under the label of strategic interests. The historical examples analyzed below also represent cases where US strategic interests conflicted with the US ideal interest of promoting the values of freedom and democracy in the region, thus compelling the United States to make difficult choices. As we will see, the preferred choice of US officials has generally been to prioritize the pursuit of strategic interests over the promotion of ideal ones.

### **First US Interest: Middle Eastern Energy Resources**

In April 1951, the Iranian Parliament appointed Mohammad Mossadeq as the country's prime minister. Mossadeq headed a popular movement, the National Front, that was determined to challenge two longstanding features of the Iranian political system: the autocratic rule of its monarchs and foreign powers' meddling in Iran's domestic affairs. A clear emphasis on democracy and self-determination proved appealing to Iranians and granted Mossadeq's National Front widespread domestic support. The Iranian prime minister repeatedly showed a profound commitment to constitutional, democratic, and social reforms. It has been argued that during the years of the Mossadeq premiership, for the first time in its long history, Iran briefly grasped the benefits deriving from a proto-form of democracy. Another major pillar of Mossadeq's political agenda was its attention to the principle of national sovereignty. The Iranian prime minister, in fact, believed that complete independence from foreign influence was an indispensable condition in order to build a genuine democratic form of government responsive to the people's needs. In this respect, Britain's absolute domination of the Iranian oil industry had proved to be an especially irritant issue for the Iranian people. Mossadeq first tried to renegotiate the terms of the British oil

concession<sup>153</sup> to obtain a fairer share of the profits deriving from the sale of Iranian oil. When met by Britain's uncompromising stance, the Iranians took a much more radical decision and passed the Law of Repossession that essentially revoked the oil concession and nationalized the country's oil industry. In response to the adoption of the Law of Repossession, Britain called for the enforcement of an international boycott of Iranian oil aimed at crippling the Iranian economy and forcing the Mossadeq government to review its nationalization policies. The British also started to consider plans for a covert operation to overthrow the Iranian prime minister. Despite some initial hesitation the United States progressively came to adopt the policies of its British ally. Hence, the administration of President Harry Truman joined the international boycott of Iranian oil and, later, that of President Dwight Eisenhower became the leading force behind the planning, financing, and staging of Operation AJAX, the joint US/British covert action that in August 1953 led to the ouster of Prime Minister Mossadeq. After the August coup, the shah of Iran ruled with increasing repression, cracked down on all dissenters, and steadily expanded his power until the country completely fell under the control of his markedly authoritarian regime. Due to the critical involvement of the United States, Iran's brief experiment with democracy was violently brought to an end.<sup>154</sup>

In the early 1950s the United States confronted an Iranian leader whose main goal was to democratize his nation, who was strenuously fighting to affirm his country's national sovereignty, and who enjoyed extensive popular support. This is not to say that the Mosaddeq government was flawless but to show that the principles promoted by the Iranian prime minister easily fit into what we have previously defined as time-honored US ideal interests. Given that, what considerations, other than shared values and ideas, influenced US foreign policymakers in their decision to actively oppose the Mossadeq government and replace it with the authoritarian rule of the shah? The main reason for the United States' decision lay in the potential for the Iranian crisis to seriously threaten important US strategic interests.

One of such interests was the containment of communism. In 1954, CIA analyst Donald N. Wilber, in what is still considered the most comprehensive official account available of the events

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<sup>153</sup>The original terms of the British oil concession in Iran (1901) were renegotiated first in 1933 by Reza Shah and then again in 1949 by his son Mohammad Reza Shah. Nevertheless, these rounds of renegotiations did not significantly alter the fundamental structure of the agreement, as control of the company firmly remained in British hands and the major beneficiary of the company's profits was the British government.

<sup>154</sup>Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2008); Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2004); Ervand Abrahamian, "The 1953 Coup in Iran," *Science And Society* 65, no. 2 (Summer 2001); Mary Ann Heiss, *Empire and Nationhood: The United States, Great Britain, and Iranian Oil, 1950- 1954* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

surrounding the Iranian coup, wrote that the dominant reason and main justification for operation AJAX was the US fear of a communist takeover of Iran. However, more recent analyses point at Mossadeq's anticommunism and widespread popularity to argue that US contemporary estimates of the Iranian communists' capability to take control of the country were probably exaggerated. There is, in fact, enough evidence to contend that, despite the undisputable existence of a US concern to contain the spread of communism, the primary interest of the United States in the Iranian crisis revolved around the strategic and commercial importance of the country's energy resources.<sup>155</sup>

Strategically, Iran was one of the world's major oil producers, and its relevance was only amplified by the fact that the country acted as a buffer between the Soviet Union and the huge oil reserves of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. The dramatic experience of World War II had made US policymakers aware of the vital role that oil would play in modern warfare and economic growth. It was a self-evident truth that whoever controlled the world's largest oil reserves would have the upper hand in the case of any future war. On 4 March 1953, according to a minute of a National Security Council meeting, US Secretary of State John F. Dulles clearly conveyed this US concern:

*"[in the case of a communist takeover in Iran] not only would the free world be deprived of the enormous assets represented by Iranian oil production and reserves, but the Russians would secure these assets and thus henceforth be free of any anxiety about their petroleum situation. Worse still, Mr. Dulles pointed out, if Iran succumbed to the Communists there was little doubt that in short order the other areas of the Middle East, with some sixty percent of the world's oil reserves, would fall into communist control."*<sup>156</sup>

Commercially, oil companies in the United States saw the Iranian crisis as an opportunity to enter the lucrative Iranian oil market, until then an exclusive preserve of the British. US commercial interests were acknowledged in a December 1952 British Foreign Office memorandum:

*"After he [US Secretary of State Dean Acheson] had again emphasized the grave danger of communism in Iran, and the necessity for an early settlement [of the oil dispute], he added that another reason for early settlement was the fact that the State Department was under*

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<sup>155</sup> Donald N. Wilber, "Overthrow of Premier Mosaddeq of Iran: November 1952- August 1953," 1954 Full text available at: [www.nytimes.com/library/world/mideast/041600iran-cia-index.html](http://www.nytimes.com/library/world/mideast/041600iran-cia-index.html); [www.nsarchive.org](http://www.nsarchive.org); and [www.cryptome.org/cia-iran-all.html](http://www.cryptome.org/cia-iran-all.html). Malcolm Byrne, "The Road to Intervention," in *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2004); Mark J. Gasiorowski, "The 1953 Coup d'Etat Against Mosaddeq," in *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2004).

<sup>156</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, Vol.X, Document 312, "Memorandum of Discussion at the 135th Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, March 4, 1953" (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1989), <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v10/d312>.

*considerable pressure from Congressmen as a result of 'lobbying' on the part of various oil brokers interested in getting into the Iranian picture.*"<sup>157</sup>

As specifically regarding the adoption of the Law of Repossession, both US policymakers and US oil companies shared the view that to let the Mosaddeq government get away with its program of nationalization would set a dangerous precedent and threaten the entire structure of the international oil industry. Mosaddeq, in fact, by deeming the British oil concession both illegal and immoral, was questioning the very principle of the sanctity of contractual relations. If other countries would follow Iran's example by forfeiting contracts as they wished, significant US investments abroad would be put in serious danger.<sup>158</sup>

The events in Iran illustrate that when faced by a conflict between supporting democratic reforms and self-determination (US ideal interests) and protecting access to energy resources and containing communism (US strategic interests) the Truman and the Eisenhower administrations gave priority to the latter. The behavior of these two administrations support the aforementioned statement by former US Ambassador Indyk and others that when dealing with conflicting national interests in the Greater Middle East "every president since Franklin Roosevelt has struck that balance in favor of the [strategic] national interest, downplaying the promotion of America's democratic values because of the region's strategic importance."<sup>159</sup>

The Iranian crisis was not the first time that US policymakers had acknowledged the relevance of Middle Eastern energy resources. Historians have often identified a previous meeting between US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Saudi King Abd al Aziz ibn Saud as a landmark in the relations of the United States with Middle Eastern oil. On 14 February 1945, on his way home from the inter-Allied conference in the Crimean city of Yalta where he had met with the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, President Roosevelt made an unusual stop in Egypt. There, the US president and the Saudi king gathered on the deck of the USS Quincy to discuss themes ranging from the acquisition of US basing rights in Saudi Arabia to the thorny issue of Jewish national aspirations in Palestine. However, the encounter essentially took place because the WWII years had taught President Roosevelt and his entourage the vital importance of oil for the US military and economic might. On the military side, the US air force, the US navy, and US land mechanized forces had become entirely dependent on oil by-products for

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<sup>157</sup> British Foreign Office memorandum, December 4, 1952, cited in James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1988), 80–83.

<sup>158</sup> Abrahamian, "The 1953 Coup in Iran."

<sup>159</sup> Indyk, Lieberthal, and O'Hanlon, *Bending History: Barack Obama's Foreign Policy*, 142.

propulsion. On the economic side, by 1945 the demand of a fast growing US economy for refined petroleum products had already started to exceed domestic supply.<sup>160</sup>

Roosevelt's preoccupation with securing his country's future access to Middle Eastern energy resources was widely shared by people in the military establishment, the Office of Strategic Services (the wartime predecessor of the CIA), and the State Department. In August 1945, in a draft memorandum to President Truman, the State Department declared that Saudi Arabia's "oil resources constitute[d] a stupendous source of strategic power, and one of the greatest material prizes in world history." A few years later, the US profound interest in Middle Eastern energy resources was reaffirmed in a classified US document holding that "oil [was] the most important single factor in United States relations with the area [of the Greater Middle East]."<sup>161</sup>

There were several reasons why the government of the United States specifically chose the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as its privileged interlocutor to pursue US energy policy in the Greater Middle East. First, the US-Saudi energy partnership dated back to 1933 when a consortium of US oil companies (the Arabian American Oil Company, ARAMCO) obtained a major oil concession for the exclusive exploration and exploitation of Saudi oil resources. Second, Saudi Arabia was one of the only two states in the Greater Middle East (the other being Turkey) not under the direct or indirect colonial control of European powers. Therefore, there were reduced risks that engagement with Saudi Arabia would result into major frictions with US wartime allies, especially France and Britain. Third, US policymakers were well aware of the potential of the Arab kingdom's vast oil reserves. By 1945 Saudi production had surpassed that of many other Arab countries and had become, the following year, second only to Iranian production in the region. Finally, during the last years of WWII, Saudi oil had already begun to significantly contribute to the US war effort.<sup>162</sup>

The 1945 meeting between President Roosevelt and King Ibn Saud marked the official entrance of the United States as a major player in the energy politics of the Greater Middle East. Since then, granting US access to the region's oil resources and preventing other countries to control them have been a constant of US foreign policy. This US strategic national interest endured throughout the

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<sup>160</sup> William Eddy, *FDR Meets Ibn Saud* (Washington DC: America-Mideast Educational and Training Services, 1954); Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis*.

<sup>161</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945, Vol.VIII, "Draft Memorandum to President Truman" (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1969), 45, <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/FRUS/FRUS-idx?type=goto&id=FRUS.FRUS1945v08&isize=M&submit=Go+to+page&page=45>; Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951, Vol.V, "Appraisal of Policies of Foreign Oil Companies in the Middle East, in Relation to United States Policies and Interests" (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), 70, <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/FRUS/FRUS-idx?type=turn&id=FRUS.FRUS1951v05&entity=FRUS.FRUS1951v05.p0110&isize=text>.

<sup>162</sup> Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis*, 47–48.



Cold War, survived the demise of the Soviet Union, and has continued down to the time of this writing. In his 2013 Address to the United Nations General Assembly, US President Barack Obama seized the opportunity to describe his administration's core interests in the Middle East and North Africa. Such core interests included the United States' commitment to "ensure the free flow of energy from the region [of the Greater Middle East] to the world." President Obama also added that "Although America is steadily reducing our own dependence on imported oil, the world still depends on the region's energy supply, and a severe disruption could destabilize the entire global economy." In this last statement the US president referred to the fact that, since its peak in 2005, US imports of foreign oil have significantly declined and in 2012 the United States bought only a small fraction (28 percent) of its oil from the Greater Middle East. The bulk of US oil imports (53 percent) came instead from the Western Hemisphere, mostly from Canada, Venezuela, and Mexico. Policies of increased domestic production and diversification of foreign suppliers notwithstanding, the United States still relies on imports for almost half of its petroleum, and US businesses and US consumers buy oil at market prices regardless of where the oil comes from. In a globalized economy, this means that a disruption of supplies from any major producer, especially Middle Eastern countries, would directly affect world prices, and it would consequently be felt by users all over the world, including in the United States. Enduring security and economic considerations continue to make Middle Eastern energy a matter of primary concern to the XXI century United States.<sup>163</sup>

## **Second US Interest: Containment**

On the Christmas Eve of 1979, the Soviet Union invaded the Central Asian country of Afghanistan. In line with the Brezhnev Doctrine, that committed the USSR to intervene whenever a fellow communist government was threatened by non-communist forces, Moscow deployed Soviet troops into Afghanistan to help the communist-led government in Kabul in its effort to quell a widespread domestic insurgency. Unsurprisingly, Soviet belligerent actions provoked vehement reactions in Washington. US President Jimmy Carter forcefully decried what he described as an illegitimate communist aggression toward a smaller and independent country. Strong words of condemnation were coupled with economic and diplomatic sanctions. Moreover, the United States soon moved to

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<sup>163</sup> Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy*, 473; Richard Sokolsky, *The United States and the Persian Gulf*, Richard D. Sokolsky (ed) (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 2003); Obama, "Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly 2013"; US Energy Information Administration, *How Dependent Are We on Foreign Oil?*, accessed May 10, 2013, [http://www.eia.gov/energy\\_in\\_brief/foreign\\_oil\\_dependence.cfm](http://www.eia.gov/energy_in_brief/foreign_oil_dependence.cfm).

provide assistance to the anti-communist forces in Afghanistan.<sup>164</sup> The scope and the intensity of the US assistance to the Afghan insurgents changed over time. From December 1979 through the spring of 1985 US strategy primarily focused on the concept of “harassment”. In other words, the limited objective behind the United States’ humanitarian and military support for the anti-communist forces was to raise the costs of the Soviet occupation as high as possible. After mid-1985, however, the United States under President Ronald Reagan significantly stepped up its involvement in Afghanistan. In fact, US foreign policymakers committed themselves to a new and much more ambitious goal, that is to help the Afghan insurgency to completely drive the Soviets out of the country “by all available means”. Throughout the crisis, US policy heavily relied on the cooperation of a number of partners that included the governments of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and China. The huge human and economic costs of the protracted conflict in Afghanistan eventually convinced the Soviet leadership to end Moscow’s direct military involvement in the country. Following difficult negotiations, the terms of the Soviet withdrawal were officially ratified by treaty in Geneva, Switzerland, in April 1988. The last Soviet troops left Afghanistan on 15 February 1989. The Soviet withdrawal was followed by a lively debate in the United States about the role, if any, that Washington should have played in a post-Soviet Afghanistan. Two distinct positions were competing for relevance. One, held mostly within the US State Department, called for the continued involvement of the United States in Afghanistan. According to its supporters, the United States should have actively pursued a peaceful political settlement for the country. The other position, generally accepted inside the CIA, argued that the United States should have simply disengaged from Afghanistan and let the Afghans and their neighboring Pakistanis sort out a political settlement by themselves. Eventually, the CIA-backed line prevailed and Afghanistan steadily fell into the back-burner of US foreign policy. Accordingly, the administration of George H.W. Bush ended US diplomatic presence in the country by closing down the US embassy in Kabul in 1989 while the subsequent Bill Clinton administration shut down the USAID Afghanistan program in 1994, thus sanctioning the official end to all US bilateral development aid to the country. In the end, a decade of US support for the anti-communist insurgency exacted an extremely high toll on Afghanistan and failed to achieve the stated US objectives of restoring peace and ushering in a new government responsive to the will of the Afghans. Moreover, soon after the Soviet withdrawal the local insurgency fractured and metastasized into forces that engaged in an endless war for the control of the country. At no distant time, from the ruins of war-torn

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<sup>164</sup>The Carter administration had already started to supply non-lethal forms of assistance to the Afghan insurgency by the summer of 1979.

Afghanistan two ominous threats arose to challenge the United States: the international terrorist organization Al Qaeda and its Afghan host, the Taliban regime.<sup>165</sup>

The decision of the United States to be involved in Afghanistan throughout the 1980s served distinct US national interests. Interestingly, before 1979 Afghanistan had not ranked high in the list of Washington's foreign policy priorities. The annual 1976 US State Department Policy Assessment clearly acknowledged that the country was "effectively dependent on the Soviet Union" but reasoned that the United States "is not, nor should it become, committed to, or responsible for the protection of Afghanistan in any respect." US perceptions drastically changed in 1979 when external events moved the country at the forefront of the Cold War struggle between the two superpowers. In February of that year, the shah of Iran, a close US client and ally, was overthrown and replaced by an Islamic revolutionary government openly hostile to the United States. Later in December, the Soviet Union directly invaded Afghanistan thus gaining a foothold in a country dangerously near to the strategic area of the Middle East. In less than a year time, the ostensibly pro-US *status quo* in the region had been significantly shaken. All of the sudden, in the words of President Carter, "The implications of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan could pose the most serious threat to the peace since the Second World War."<sup>166</sup>

First, and perhaps most importantly, the very credibility of the US commitment to its time-honored Cold War policy of containment of the Soviet Union was at stake. In fact, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan proved that the Soviet Union was willing to resort to force to take over a neighboring country. Such a belligerent behavior outside of the traditionally recognized Soviet sphere of influence required a determined US response. In order to maintain its international credibility, the United States decided to show to the Soviet Union, and the world, "that aggression does not pay".<sup>167</sup>

In addition to representing a serious threat to the US strategic interest of containing communism, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was interpreted in Washington as a direct menace to US oil interests in the Greater Middle East. The establishment of Soviet military bases in Afghanistan, in

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<sup>165</sup> Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars, the Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Group, 2004); Milton Bearden and James Risen, *The Main Enemy: The Inside Story of the CIA's Final Showdown with the KGB* (New York: Random House Inc, 2003); Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); United Nations, "Afghanistan: Questioning the Future," July 26, 1989, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

<sup>166</sup> US Department of State, "Annual Policy Assessment 1976," March 9, 1976; Jimmy Carter, "State of the Union Address 1980," January 23, 1980, <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/speeches/su80jec.phtml>.

<sup>167</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Talking Points for Telephone Calls on the President's Speech," January 1980, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/marketing/index.jsp>.

fact, would have not only got the Red Army dangerously closer to the extremely valuable oil reserves of the Persian Gulf. But it would have also greatly increased Soviet potential to threaten the vital sea lanes of communication of the Indian Ocean that, among other things, supply oil to the industrialized West.<sup>168</sup>

Finally, in their public statements, US officials in both the Carter and Reagan administrations commonly linked US support for the anti-communist forces in Afghanistan with the advancement there of traditional US ideal interests, including the principles of national sovereignty, independence from foreign influence, self-determination, freedom, and peace.

Therefore, throughout the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan the pursuit of US strategic interests went hand in hand with the promotion of US ideal interests. However, the Afghan example has also proved that, even in the case of convergence of interests, a distinct hierarchy among different US national interests persisted. Tellingly, after the major strategic objective of containing communism was achieved with the defeat of the Red Army, US policymakers quickly lost interest in pursuing those often-recalled noble goals of bringing peace to Afghanistan, helping to establish a government truly representative of the Afghan people, and rebuilding the country's wrecked economy. With regard to the Afghan crisis, strategic concerns evidently ranked much higher than ideal concerns in the US hierarchy of interests.

The containment of communism became a global US strategic interest right after the end of WWII. The early formulations of the US policy of containment appeared in George Kennan's 1946 Long Telegram and 1947 The Sources of Soviet Conduct article. Kennan, a career Foreign Service officer based in Moscow, recommended that "The main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies." Kennan's ideas exerted a strong influence on the production in 1950 of National Security Council report 68 (NSC 68). NSC 68, long considered one of the fundamental documents of the US Cold War policy, argued that "any substantial further extension of the area under the domination of the Kremlin would raise the possibility that no coalition adequate to confront the Kremlin with greater strength could be assembled." With regard to the specific region of the Greater Middle East, the US concern with perceived Soviet expansive tendencies significantly informed the Middle East policies of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations and the doctrines that carry their names. In March 1947, President Truman warned that the fall of Turkey and Greece into communists' hands would result in "confusion and disorder" spreading

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<sup>168</sup> A.Z. Hilali, *US-Pakistan Relationship: Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005).

“throughout the entire Middle East.” A decade later, in January 1957, President Eisenhower raised the ante of US engagement in the region by authorizing “the employment of the armed forces of the United States to secure and protect the territorial integrity and political independence” of any Middle Eastern country under the menace of international communism.<sup>169</sup>

During the first decade of the Cold War, the containment of communism was the main rationale behind the US policy of building alliances and acquiring basing-rights in the Greater Middle East. On the one hand, US diplomatic effort led to Turkey and Greece joining NATO in 1952 and to the signing of an interlocking series of agreements during 1954 and 1955 (known as the Baghdad Pact or Central Treaty Organization) between Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, and Britain. On the other hand, the United States obtained the rights to establish permanent military bases in several Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, Libya, Morocco, and Turkey. The containment of communism became also the justification for a variety of US overt and covert actions in the region, including military and economic assistance to anti-communist forces in Turkey and Greece (1947), support for the Zaim coup against the constitutionally elected President Al Quwatli in Syria (1949), the staging of the coup that overthrew Iran’s democratically appointed Prime Minister Mossadeq (1953), and the provision of funds used by pro-West President Chamoun to rig the elections and obtain a parliamentary majority in Lebanon (1957). The final goal of such an articulated US policy was to create a sort of *cordon sanitaire* on the southern flank of the Soviet Union that would have simultaneously contained Soviet expansive tendencies and protected the strategically vital region of the Greater Middle East.<sup>170</sup>

The containment of communism proved to be a particularly strong and protean concept that informed the decisions of US policymakers throughout the duration of the Cold War. Although the demise of the Soviet Union is generally considered a watershed event, the collapse of communism in 1991 did not really alter the main US strategic interests in the Greater Middle East. In fact, despite the end of the communist threat, the policy of containment did not disappear but instead it continued in the form of a policy of “dual containment” of Iraq and Iran (the two countries that replaced in the US post-Cold War narrative the Soviet Union as the major threats to US national

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<sup>169</sup> George Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs* 25, no. 4 (July 1947); National Security Council, “NSC 68, United States Objectives and Programs for National Security,” April 14, 1950, 4, [http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/10-1.pdf](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/10-1.pdf); Truman, “The Truman Doctrine Speech”; Dwight Eisenhower, “Eisenhower Doctrine Speech,” January 5, 1957, <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3360>.

<sup>170</sup> Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis*; Douglas Little, “Cold War and Covert Action: The U.S. and Syria, 1945-1958,” *Middle East Journal* 44, no. 1 (Winter 1990); Kermit Roosevelt, *Countercoup: The Struggle for the Control of Iran* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979); Wilbur Crane Eveland, *Ropes of Sand: America’s Failure in the Middle East* (New York: Norton, 1980).

interests in the region). The George H.W. Bush administration laid the foundations of the policy of dual containment but it was that of Bill Clinton, in its 1994 National Security Strategy document, that made such a policy the official US policy in the Greater Middle East. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 definitively removed the threat represented by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein from the Middle East theater thus leaving Iran as the only remaining target of the US longstanding policy of containment. As of today, the containment of Iran firmly remains one of the major US strategic interests in the Greater Middle East. In its 2010 National Security Strategy document (NSS 2010), the Obama administration singled out the containment of Iran, and in particular of Iranian nuclear aspirations, as one of the administration's top priorities in the region. The NSS 2010 states that Iran's "illicit nuclear program", support for "terrorism", undermining of "peace between Israelis and Palestinians", and denial of its people's "universal rights" make it a serious threat to the security of the United States. The NSS 2010 also warns leaders in Tehran that "if the Iranian Government continues to refuse to live up to its international obligations, it will face greater isolation." Although the specific targets of the policy have changed over time, containment still endures as a critical aspect of US foreign policy in the Greater Middle East.<sup>171</sup>

### **Third US Interest: Terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction**

On 11 September 2001, four civilian airliners were hijacked by individuals associated with a radical Islamist group called Al Qaeda. Two planes struck the World Trade Center in New York, one plane hit the Pentagon in Washington DC, and a last plane crashed into an empty field in Pennsylvania. On that day, about 3,000 people died. The US administration of President George W. Bush described the 9/11 terrorist attacks as an "act of war" and responded by declaring a "global war on terror". The first targets of the US response were the Al Qaeda organization and the Taliban regime that had been harboring the Al Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan. Invoking the right to self-defense, explicitly recognized by article 51 of the UN Charter, and acting with widespread international support, the United States, on October 8, launched a military attack in Afghanistan. Initially, the Afghan War seemed an evident success, with the Taliban regime terminated in little more than six weeks. However, subsequent developments showed that early US optimism was somewhat misleading. In fact, during this stage of the war, Taliban forces decided not to directly confront the

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<sup>171</sup> Stephen Hubbell, "The Containment Myth," *Middle East Report* 28 (Fall 1998), <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer208/containment-myth>; Bill Clinton, "The National Security Strategy of The United States 1994" (The White House, July 1994), <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/1994.pdf>; Obama, "The National Security Strategy of the United States 2010."

superior military might of the United States and its allies. Instead, the Taliban regime simply melted away and disappeared with its armaments intact. Similarly, with the notable exception of the battle of Tora Bora, members of Al Qaeda generally dispersed when chased by US forces. This meant that, at no distant time, the United States found itself fighting a pugnacious insurgency in Afghanistan led by the same Taliban and Al Qaeda forces Washington thought it had initially defeated. Early achievements in Afghanistan contributed to the expansion of the objectives of the US Global War on Terror. In his January 2002 State of the Union Address, President G.W. Bush proclaimed that the US response to 9/11 was not just limited to non-state terrorist groups, like Al Qaeda, but it also included a number of rogue states that the US administration perceived as being a threat to the US national interest, both because of their support for terrorist organizations and their possession or pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Bush identified such rogue states with Iraq, Iran, and North Korea and grouped them under the banner of the “axis of evil”. At the West Point Military Academy, five months later, the US president went even further and announced the right of the United States to take pre-emptive military action against an enemy that might represent a future security threat to the country. The State of the Union and the West Point presidential speeches provided respectively the justification and the doctrine that led to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. The Bush administration, in fact, maintained that the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein possessed WMDs, supported terrorism, and represented a serious threat to the United States and the world. Despite failing to obtain a UN Security Council resolution legitimizing military intervention, the United States started a military campaign in Iraq in March 2003. Within three weeks a US-led coalition occupied the Iraqi capital Baghdad and overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein. Among Bush administration officials, there was a generally shared expectation that Iraq would rapidly become a stable pro-West country with the coalition forces welcomed as liberators. Such an expectation soon proved to be misplaced. The fall of Saddam Hussein was followed by extensive public disorder, widespread looting, and rampant criminality. The situation was only compounded by a number of early decisions made by the Coalition Provisional Authority (the US-appointed Iraqi provisional government); especially, the decision to completely dismiss the Iraqi military, thus throwing thousands of dissatisfied armed soldiers onto the streets. Many of these soldiers ended up joining an emerging insurgency that had a distinct anti-American flavor. By the third year of the Iraqi War, the situation in the country became even more complicated because of the emergence of a violent sectarian conflict between Iraq’s Sunni and Shiite communities. When he took office in January 2009, US president Barack Obama inherited both the conflict in Afghanistan and that in Iraq.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Gideon Rose, Peter Peterson, and James Hoge, eds., *Understanding the War on Terror* (New York: Foreign Affairs

The US Global War on Terror appeared to be a manifest case of convergence of distinct US national interests. On the one hand, the US response to 9/11 would serve clear US strategic interests. Indeed, the United States engaged in prolonged military campaigns to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, two openly hostile regimes. Moreover, the United States also committed its forces to the eradication of Al Qaeda, a radical Islamist group operating mostly in and from the Greater Middle East, that had been able to carry out deadly terrorist attacks on US soil. On the other hand, the US Global War on Terror would help to promote time-honored US ideal interests. In fact, the stated goal of US actions was to make the United States and the world safer by eliminating the threat represented by rogue states and terrorist organizations. In addition, after the forced removals of the Taliban and of Saddam Hussein, Afghanistan and Iraq would be put on a reform path to become democratic states.

However, over time, policies adopted by the Bush administration, and continued to some extent by the Obama administration, generated evident tensions between US strategic and ideal interests. Some of these policies infringed on US civil liberties. A telling example was the Bush administration's secret surveillance program through which the National Security Agency monitored the international phone calls and emails of "hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people inside the United States to search for evidence of terrorist activity without the court-approved warrants ordinarily required for domestic spying." Critics of the surveillance program argued that US citizens might have been monitored even if they had no connection to terrorist activity. Other such policies were at odds with both US and international laws. The use of torture during the interrogations of terrorism suspects was a case in point. The Bush administration acknowledged the use of practices such as prolonged sleep deprivation, forced nudity and feeding, and waterboarding but contended that these "enhanced interrogation techniques" were short of torture and, therefore, consistent with US and international laws. Many observers, including civil liberties and human rights organizations, strongly disagreed with the Bush administration's argument and publicly condemned such practices. Finally, policies adopted to wage the Global War on Terror raised concerns regarding due process of law. Indefinite military detention proved to be an especially sensitive issue. Indefinite detention allowed the US military to detain both US and foreign individuals suspected of terrorism for indefinite periods of time without a trial or due process. According to its critics, "despite the Sixth Amendment's guarantee of a right to trial, [indefinite

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Books, 2005); Richard Clarke, *Against All Enemies* (New York: Free Press, 2004); George W. Bush, "President Bush Delivers Graduation Speech at West Point" (The White House, June 1, 2002), <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html>; George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address 2002" (The White House, January 29, 2002), <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>; Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack: The Definitive Account of the Decision to Invade Iraq* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004); Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).



detention] would let the government lock up any citizen it swears is a terrorist, without the burden of proving its case to an independent judge, and for the lifespan of an amorphous war that conceivably will never end.” All that considered, the US Global War on Terror proved to be a more controversial endeavor than it could otherwise have first appeared.<sup>173</sup>

The US interest in Middle Eastern terrorism became significant in the wake of the Arab-Israeli War of 1967. It was, in fact, after the Arab countries’ military defeat in the war that a number of Palestinian movements radicalized and began to resort to terrorist tactics, including airplane hijackings, hostage takings, and bombings, to target US citizens and assets. One of such movements was the Abu Nidal Organization (ANO), a spin-off of the larger Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The ANO held more radical views than the rival PLO with regard to the destruction of the state of Israel and the opposition to diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv. Since the mid-1970s, the United States had considered the ANO the most dangerous terrorist organization in the world. According to the US Council on Foreign Relations, ANO terrorist activity was responsible for the killing of three hundred people and the wounding of hundreds more in twenty different countries. A sadly notorious example of ANO terrorism was the December 1985 simultaneous attacks on US and Israeli airport counters in Rome, Italy, and Vienna, Austria, that killed eighteen people and injured 111. By the mid-1980s, the United States had started programs of offensive covert operations against the ANO and other terrorist groups. Washington exercised pressure on those governments harboring ANO leaders and operatives to cut their ties with the terrorist organization. The US effort succeeded insofar as Iraq expelled the ANO in 1983, Syria followed in 1987, and similarly did Libya in 1999. The founder of the group Sabri al Banna, known by his *nom de guerre* Abu Nidal (father of the struggle), reportedly died in Iraq in 2002. As of 2013, the ANO is still listed among the US State Department Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations despite the fact that no major attack has been attributed to the ANO since its founder’s reported death.<sup>174</sup>

As it was the case with the US Global War on Terror, US counterterrorism prior to the 9/11 attacks did not focus solely on non-state terrorist groups but it also targeted state sponsors of terrorism.

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<sup>173</sup> James Risen and Eric Lichtblau, “Bush Lets U.S. Spy on Callers without Courts,” *New York Times*, December 16, 2005, [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/16/politics/16program.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/16/politics/16program.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0); Donald H. Rumsfeld, “Rumsfeld’s Memo on Interrogation Techniques,” *US Department of Defense*, April 16, 2003, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB127/03.04.16.pdf>; Spencer Ackerman, “Senate Wants the Military to Lock You Up Without Trial,” *Wired.com*, December 1, 2011, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2011/12/senate-military-detention/>.

<sup>174</sup> Timothy Naftali, “US Counterterrorism before Bin Laden,” *International Journal* 60, no. 1 (Winter 2004); Council on Foreign Relations, *Abu Nidal Organization (ANO)*, accessed June 26, 2014, <http://www.cfr.org/israel/abu-nidal-organization-ano-aka-fatah-revolutionary-council-arab-revolutionary-brigades-revolutionary-organization-socialist-muslims/p9153>; US Department of State, “Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” accessed June 23, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>.

Libya under the rule of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi was perceived by Washington as an especially dangerous threat to the United States. With its involvement in countries, such as the Sudan and Chad, the Qaddafi regime had repeatedly stood in the way of US interests in North Africa and the Middle East. Furthermore, according to US officials, Col. Qaddafi supported radical and revolutionary groups around the world and pursued programs to develop WMDs. In April 1986, the bombing of “La Belle” discotheque in West Berlin killed two American servicemen and a Turkish woman, and wounded more than 200 people, including scores of US soldiers. The United States blamed the Qaddafi regime for being behind the “La Belle” terrorist attack. In response, the US administration of President Ronald Reagan approved Operation El Dorado Canyon. Operation El Dorado Canyon was a short military campaign that consisted primarily of airstrikes against targets in the Libyan cities of Tripoli and Benghazi. In a fashion that anticipated the George Bush administration’s doctrine of pre-emption in Iraq, the Reagan’s White House justified US airstrikes against Libya by saying that: “The United States has chosen to exercise its right of self-defense [...] It is our hope this action will pre-empt and discourage Libyan attacks against innocent civilians in the future.” Following almost two decades of tense US-Libyan relations, the abrupt decision in 2003 of Col. Qaddafi to renounce state-sponsored terrorism and abandon its programs on WMDs paved the way to a process of rapprochement between the two countries that, by 2006, had resulted in the removal of Libya from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism and the reopening of the US embassy in Tripoli.<sup>175</sup>

In describing the US core interests in the Middle East and North Africa, US President Obama stated that his administration

*“will dismantle terrorist networks that threaten our people. Wherever possible, we will build the capacity of our partners, respect the sovereignty of nations, and work to address the root causes of terror. But when it’s necessary to defend the United States against terrorist attack, we will take direct action.”*<sup>176</sup>

President Obama then added: “we will not tolerate the development or use of weapons of mass destruction [...] We reject the development of nuclear weapons that could trigger a nuclear arms race in the region, and undermine the global nonproliferation regime.” Obama’s statements prove

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<sup>175</sup> Chomsky, *Pirates and Emperors, Old and New*; Bernard Gwertzman, “Plots on Global Scale Charged,” *New York Times*, April 15, 1986, <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/04/15/world/plots-on-global-scale-charged.html>; CQ Press, *The Middle East*.

<sup>176</sup> Obama, “Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly 2013.”

that the US interest in Middle Eastern terrorism, and the related US concern about the development, use, and transfer of WMDs, remain a top-priority for the United States.<sup>177</sup>

#### **US Fourth Interest: Special Relationship with Israel**

In January 2006, Palestinians of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip cast their vote to elect the members of the Palestinian legislative council. Two parties were the main contenders in the 2006 elections: Fatah and Hamas. The first had been for a long time the leading force within the Palestinian Liberation Organization and then, after the Oslo Accords, of the Palestinian Authority. The second, an offshoot of the Gaza branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, came into existence in 1988 during the second Palestinian *Intifada* (uprising). In 2006, Hamas ran a successful electoral campaign promising clear government and emphasizing its record of efficiency in providing basic services to the populace against Fatah's perceived corruption and inability to achieve any significant success in its prolonged negotiations with Israel. The outcome of the elections was a victory for Hamas that obtained the majority of the seats in the Palestinian legislative council. As a consequence, Hamas would lead the new Palestinian cabinet while Fatah would retain the institution of the presidency. The result of the elections caught the international community off guard. Such an unexpected outcome proved especially troubling for the United States. In fact, the George W. Bush administration had initially been a strong advocate of the 2006 elections and had described them as an important exercise in democracy. However, US stance completely changed after Hamas' victory, when the Bush administration joined Israel in refusing to recognize or even deal with the new government. After Hamas refused to accept the Middle East diplomatic "Quartet",<sup>178</sup> demands to recognize Israel's right to exist, renounce violence, and accept the terms of all previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements, the United States, Israel, and other Western countries imposed an international financial boycott against the new government. In addition, Israel, with the approval of the Bush administration, clamped down on Palestinians' freedom of movement and laid a siege on the Gaza Strip (Hamas' stronghold) limiting or halting the shipments of fuel, commercial goods, construction materials, food, and water. Furthermore, following the abduction of an Israeli soldier in June, Israel also began to perform military incursions into the Gaza Strip that resulted in the death of large numbers of Palestinians. The ostensible goal of the overall US policy was to boycott, isolate, and bring down the new Palestinian government, primarily because it was led by a

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> The "Quartet" included the United Nations, the European Union, the United States, and Russia.

force, Hamas, that was profoundly hostile to Israel and that continued to resort to terrorist activities against Tel Aviv. From the Palestinian perspective, instead, the boycott and the blockade were simply forms of collective punishment through which the United States and its allies penalized Palestinians for having democratically expressed their political preferences. According to leaked confidential documents, subsequently corroborated by sources in the United States and Palestine, the Bush administration also approved a covert operation in 2006 aimed at the forced removal of the democratically-elected Hamas government. The United States secretly planned to provide, via its regional allies, training and weapons to Fatah forces. The plan was to provoke a Palestinian civil war between Fatah and Hamas that would ideally result in Hamas' overthrow and the formation of a new government more acceptable to Washington. However, US actions backfired. The Hamas leadership, in fact, had grown increasingly concerned about the possibility of a US-sponsored coup, and therefore, in June 2007, decided to stage its own coup, occupy all main Fatah bases in Gaza, and seize complete control of the Strip. In response, Palestinian President, and Fatah leader, Mahmoud Abbas dismissed the Hamas government and formed an emergency cabinet that would rule the West Bank separately. Such a division of the Palestinian Authority into two different governments, one ruling over the Gaza Strip and the other ruling over the West Bank, continued until early 2014 when, after a number of previous failed reconciliation attempts, Hamas and Fatah eventually agreed to establish a new unity government.<sup>179</sup>

The case of the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections represents a manifest example of conflicting US national interests. On the one hand, there was the longstanding US ideal interest of promoting the spread of democratic values. On the other hand, there were the similarly time-honored strategic interests of countering terrorism and guaranteeing the security of the state of Israel.

Prior to the Palestinian elections, President G.W. Bush had announced his administration's Freedom Agenda for the promotion of democracy around the world. The US administration maintained that the spread of freedom was "the great alternative to the terrorists' ideology of hatred, because expanding liberty and democracy will help defeat extremism and protect the American people." In line with the principles contained in the Freedom Agenda, the United States sponsored the idea of holding democratic elections for the Palestinian legislative council. However, US commitment to the spread of democratic values was seriously tested after such elections unexpectedly brought to

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<sup>179</sup> William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2013); Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis*; Council on Foreign Relations, *Hamas*, accessed June 26, 2014, <http://www.cfr.org/israel/hamas/p8968>; David Rose, "The Gaza Bombshell," *Vanity Fair*, April 2008, <http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/04/gaza200804>; Conflicts Forum, *Elliot Abrams' Uncivil War*, January 7, 2007, <http://www.conflictsforum.org/2007/elliott-abrams-uncivil-war/>; BBC, "Hamas and Fatah Unveil Palestinian Reconciliation Plan," April 23, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-27128902>.

power Hamas, a Palestinian Islamist movement that was profoundly hostile to Israel and that the United States considered a terrorist organization.<sup>180</sup>

Hamas, in fact, had been on the US State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations since 1997. The organization's threatening nature was only magnified in the eyes of US policymakers by the fact that Hamas' attacks primarily targeted Israeli military forces, civilians, and assets both in Israel proper and in the Occupied Territories. According to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hamas has been responsible for the deaths of about 400 Israelis since the early 1990s. The official policy of the United States toward Hamas, as laid down in the Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act of 2006 (Public Law 109-446), is "to avoid contact with and refrain from supporting the terrorist organization Hamas until it agrees to recognize Israel, renounce violence, disarm, and accept prior agreements." With regard to the US policy toward Hamas, it is evident that the US interest of combating terrorism in the Greater Middle East coalesced with the other, equally important, US interest of protecting Israel.<sup>181</sup>

Eventually, these latter two strategic interests proved to be more important for US officials than the ideal interest of promoting democratic practices in the Occupied Territories. Hence, the Bush administration quickly reverted its previous stance of support for the Palestinian elections, joined the international boycott of the new government, approved Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip, and allegedly planned to stage an armed coup to remove Hamas from power.

For a long time the security of the state of Israel has been a major interest of the United States in the Greater Middle East. The Arab-Israeli War of 1967 is often considered a watershed in the relationship between Washington and Tel Aviv. It was, in fact, the 1967 War that marked the full alignment of the United States with Israel. Before the war, successive US administrations tried to adopt a somewhat neutral position between the conflicting goals of Israeli and Arab nationalisms. US officials, especially in the State and Defense Departments, repeatedly warned that by openly siding with Israel, the United States would inevitably jeopardize its relations with the Arab world, therefore enabling the rise of Soviet influence in the Greater Middle East and risking the loss of the region's vital energy supplies. Despite such warnings, even before 1967, domestic political considerations made US policies often align with Israeli interests. One of these occasions occurred

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<sup>180</sup> The White House, "President Bush's Freedom Agenda Helped Protect The American People," accessed June 26, 2014, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/factsheets/freedomagenda.html>.

<sup>181</sup> US Department of State, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations"; Data from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs cited in Jim Zanotti, *Hamas: Background and Issues for Congress* (Congressional Research Service, December 2, 2010), 3, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R41514.pdf>; US Congress, "Public Law 109-446" (US Government Printing Office, December 21, 2006), <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-109publ446/html/PLAW-109publ446.htm>.

in 1947 when US President Harry Truman actively lobbied in favor of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 for the partition of Palestine (a resolution strongly opposed by Arab countries) and quickly recognized the independence of the new Jewish state that originated from that decision. President Truman explained his pro-Israel policy with the often-recalled words: “I am sorry, gentlemen, but I have to answer to hundreds of thousands who are anxious for the success of Zionism<sup>182</sup>; I do not have hundreds of thousands of Arabs among my constituents.” Truman’s concern with US domestic elections obviously informed the president’s Israeli policy. On other occasions, regional dynamics in the Greater Middle East influenced US stance toward Israel. The events of 1958 are a telling example. That year witnessed the union of Egypt and Syria into the United Arab Republic, a military coup that overthrew a pro-West monarchy in Iraq, and an increasing opposition against the pro-West governments of Lebanon and Jordan. The US National Security Council recognized that the “current conditions and political trends in the Near East are inimical to Western interests” and noted that a “logical corollary” of opposition to radical Arab nationalism “would be to support Israel as the only strong pro-West power left in the Near East.” Regional geopolitical developments seemed to call for the establishment of a closer relationship between the United States and Israel.<sup>183</sup>

In June 1967, mounting tensions in the Greater Middle East led to the outbreak of the second Arab-Israeli war.<sup>184</sup> In a mere six days, the Israeli military defeated the combined forces of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan and seized the territories of the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula (from Egypt), of the Golan Heights (from Syria), and of East Jerusalem and the West Bank (from Jordan). Israel’s outstanding military performance in the war convinced US policymakers of the potential benefits for the US national interest deriving from the establishment of a “special relationship” with the Jewish state. As a consequence, after the war, US economic and military assistance to Israel increased sharply. In 1968, US bilateral assistance amounted to \$77 million while, in 1975, it had spiked to \$693 million and it has increased ever since. According to the US Congressional Research Service, Israel is currently “the largest cumulative recipient of US foreign assistance since War World II.” The United States also committed itself to the double task of transforming the Israeli military into one of the most efficient and technologically sophisticated armed forces in the world

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<sup>182</sup> Zionism is a Jewish nationalistic movement that originated in Central and Eastern Europe in the XIX century and then spread to other regions of the world including to the United States. Zionism’s primary goal is the creation and support of a Jewish national state in the territory of Palestine.

<sup>183</sup> John Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (London: Penguin Books, 2007); Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis*; Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy*; Eddy, *FDR Meets Ibn Saud*, 34–35; Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Vol. XII, Near East Region; Iraq; Iran; Arabian Peninsula, “Paper Prepared by the National Security Council Planning Board,” 1958, 114; 119, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v12/d35>.

<sup>184</sup> The first Arab-Israeli war took place in May 1948 after Israel’s declaration of independence.

and of maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge over its neighbors. Furthermore, over the years, successive US administrations have provided Israel with consistent diplomatic backing. In this sense, it is extremely telling that, since the 1967 War, the United States has used its veto-power at the United Nations Security Council to stop the adoption of more than 40 resolutions that were critical of the state of Israel.<sup>185</sup>

Despite the much publicized frictions between the Obama administration and the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu, especially over Israel's ongoing settlement policy in the Occupied Territories, the "special relationship" between the two countries has continued generally unaltered down to the present day. Before a 2014 meeting at the White House between the US president and the Israeli prime minister, President Obama reaffirmed the "incredible" and "unbreakable" bond uniting the two nations. Obama also acknowledged the existence of "a strong bipartisan commitment in this country to make sure that Israel's security is preserved in any contingency." The US president finally emphasized the fact that the United States has no "closer friend or ally than Israel." The message was clear: the security of Israel still ranks high in the list of US priorities in the Greater Middle East.<sup>186</sup>

## Final Remarks

This chapter has provided a study of three important issues concerning the practice of US foreign policy. First, we have discussed the characteristics that qualify the political process of US foreign policymaking. A good knowledge of such a process is critical in order to understand US international behavior. As we have seen, a great variety of actors, domestic and external, bearers of particular interests, take part into the process of foreign policymaking at different levels and different times. The result of this complex negotiating process is the national interest. The national interest has been the object of the analysis developed in the second section of this chapter. In the case of the United States, we have singled out three major clusters of interests that constitute the US national interest broadly defined: realist, socio-economic, and ideal interests. When ideal interests dominate decisions on foreign policy, there is often consistency between values publicly professed

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<sup>185</sup> Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 354; in the summary section of Jeremy Sharp, *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel* (Congressional Research Service, April 11, 2014), <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33222.pdf>; Global Policy Forum, *Subjects of UN Security Council Votes*, accessed June 26, 2014, <http://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/102/40069.html>.

<sup>186</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu before Bilateral Meeting" (The White House, March 3, 2014), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/03/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-netanyahu-bilateral-meeting>.

and actual policies undertaken. On the contrary, when realist and socio-economic interests prevail, we could experience a disconnect between the rhetoric and the practice of US foreign policy. Finally, we have showed that, since World War II, the foreign policy of the United States in the Greater Middle East has been systematically influenced by four primary interests: access to Middle Eastern energy resources, containment of hostile powers, policies to counter terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the special relationship with Israel. The last section of this chapter has also provided historical evidence supporting the argument that when confronted with conflicting national interests in the Greater Middle East, US foreign policymakers have traditionally taken decisions that favored strategic interests over ideal interests. In our following study of the US response to the Arab Awakening, we are going to assess if, when faced by similar conflicting national interests, the Obama administration adopted the US traditional policy of prioritizing strategic interests over ideal interests or if, in this respect, the response of the Obama team showed significant change compared to the Middle East policies of previous US administrations.



## PART THREE

# THE ARAB AWAKENING

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## Egypt: the Last Days of the Pharaoh

### US-Egyptian Relations prior to 2011

The Arab Republic of Egypt has long occupied an especially important place in the US policy toward the region of the Greater Middle East. The country's large population of about 80 million people (with one in every four Arabs being an Egyptian), its ancient civilization (with a history of 4,000 years of centralized rule), and its military and political clout make Egypt a trendsetter in the Arab world. The cooperation of successive US administrations with Egyptian leaders has therefore been instrumental to the projection of US influence in the wider Middle East.<sup>187</sup>

Through its influence in Egypt the United States has pursued one of the major US strategic interests in the region, its special relationship with Israel. Since 1979, the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel has represented the backbone of the US policy to secure Israel and a staple in the overall US effort to find a solution to the broader Arab-Israeli conflict. After the signing of the 1979 peace treaty, the United States has generally viewed Egypt as a moderating force in the Middle East and it has provided the country with an average of \$2 billion per year of bilateral assistance (\$1.3 billion of which in the form of military aid). Egyptian leaders, on their part, have repeatedly helped the US government to address the complexities of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Egypt's role after Hamas seized power in the Gaza Strip in 2007 is a case in point. During that crisis the Egyptian government backed the George W. Bush administration's policy of isolating Hamas while favoring the Fatah government in the West Bank. Moreover, Egypt joined the US-sanctioned Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip by mostly sealing its border with the Palestinian Territories. Finally, Egyptian envoys acted as essential mediators between the United States and Hamas. In fact, given that Hamas is a US-designated foreign terrorist organization, the government of the United States officially does not hold direct negotiations with it.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> M. W. Daly, *The Cambridge History of Egypt. Vol.2, Modern Egypt from 1517 to the End of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); P.J. Vatikiotis, *The History of Modern Egypt: From Muhammad Ali to Mubarak* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Leon Carl Brown, *Diplomacy in the Middle East: The International Relations of Regional and Outside Powers* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004).

<sup>188</sup> Hamas has been on the US Department of State's list of designated foreign terrorist organizations since 1997. US Department of State, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations"; Jeremy Sharp, *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations 02/09/2009* (Congressional Research Service, September 2, 2009); International Crisis Group, *Gaza's Unfinished Business* (International Crisis Group, April 23, 2009), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Israel%20Palestine/85%20Gazas%20Unfinished%20Business.pdf>.

Containment is another important US strategic interest in Egypt. After the fall of the shah of Iran in 1979, Egypt became one of the three pillars, along with Saudi Arabia and Israel, of the US policy of containment in the Greater Middle East. Over the years Egypt's strategic location at the crossroad of three continents and astride the Suez Canal has guaranteed critical transit rights to US aircraft and warships. Egypt's military, political, and cultural influence has also proved extremely useful to counter the regional initiatives of powers hostile to the United States. This was true both with regard to the Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and theocratic Iran. For example, during Gulf War I (1990-91) Egypt first helped the United States to obtain the support of the Arab League for a military intervention against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and then Cairo also provided troops to the anti-Saddam coalition. With regard to the containment of Iran, Egypt has shared the US deep concerns about Teheran's contested nuclear program and Iranian financing of militant groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah.<sup>189</sup>

The US strategic interest of countering terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction has also significantly benefited from Egyptian cooperation. Egypt is a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and we have already mentioned the Egyptian government's firm support for the US opposition to Iran's alleged program of developing nuclear weapons. Moreover, since 1979 the cooperation between the two countries in the areas of counterterrorism and intelligence gathering/sharing has steadily increased. Tellingly, after the 9/11 attacks against the United States, Egypt was among the countries that allowed the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to deport terrorist suspects on their soil in order to be interrogated and possibly tortured (as part of a highly classified CIA program of extraordinary rendition and secret detention).<sup>190</sup>

During the first months of the Barack Obama's tenure as president of the United States there were numerous diplomatic exchanges between the two countries that culminated in the US president's June 2009 visit to Egypt and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's trip to Washington DC in August 2009, Mubarak's first visit to the United States in over five years. In a March 2009 interview with the Arab television network *Al Arabiya*, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared: "I really consider President and Mrs. Mubarak to be friends of my family. So I hope to see him often here in Egypt and in the United States." Secretary Clinton's remarks were probably exaggerated. According

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<sup>189</sup> Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy*; Sharp, *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations* 02/09/2009; John Simpson, *The Wars Against Saddam: Taking the Hard Road to Baghdad* (UK: Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>190</sup> Sharp, *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations* 02/09/2009; Amnesty International, *Egypt – Systematic Abuses in the Name of Security*, April 2007, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE12/001/2007/en/27dc4dc8-d3c5-11dd-8743-d305bea2b2c7/mde120012007en.pdf>; American Civil Liberties Union, *Accountability for Torture: Infographic* (ACLU), accessed July 8, 2014, <https://www.aclu.org/national-security/accountability-torture-infographic>; Open Society Foundations, *Globalizing Torture: CIA Secret Detention and Extraordinary Rendition*.

to interviews we performed with foreign policy experts familiar with the facts, the longstanding partnership between Egypt and the United States was based on mutual utility but not on a great deal of mutual affection. It was a bit more than a relationship of convenience but it certainly did not amount to friendship. US President Obama and Egyptian President Mubarak had a roughly consistent vision of their interests in the Greater Middle East and expressed their willingness to continue their cooperation on the issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict, counterterrorism, and the containment of Iran. In fact, in its Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations for fiscal year 2010, the Obama administration recognized the importance of Egypt as a “US partner in the pursuit of Middle East peace and regional stability.” However, US public expressions of concern about Egyptian domestic political reform and human rights records prevented the relationship from growing warmer. In the same Congressional Budget Justification document, US officials noted that “Despite some progress, achieving meaningful reform [in Egypt] will continue to present challenges.” Lingering tensions over political reform and human rights were clearly exposed when Mubarak decided not to attend Obama’s speech at Cairo University on 4 June 2009.<sup>191</sup>

### **The Egyptian Uprising and US Response**

Activists in Egypt called for a nation-wide demonstration for 25 January 2011.<sup>192</sup> On that day, tens of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets in many cities throughout the country. The opposition to the regime of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak included groups with very different backgrounds: from educated liberal or left-leaning youth, to the Egyptian labor unions, to the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood. As a consequence, the nature of the anti-Mubarak opposition was inherently fragmented and the ensuing demonstrations were largely leaderless. Most of the protesters’ claims were about domestic problems: widespread corruption and unemployment, an end

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<sup>191</sup> Hillary Clinton, “Interview With Randa Aboul Azem of Al Arabiya” (US Department of State, March 2, 2009), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/03/120115.htm>; Thomas Carothers, “What The United States Wants in Egypt,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 1, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/05/01/what-united-states-wants-in-egypt/h9qh>; Butter David, Chatham House Interview, interview by Eugenio Lilli, October 30, 2012; Kinninmont Jane, Chatham House Interview, interview by Eugenio Lilli, December 5, 2012; Trager Eric, The Washington Institute Interview, interview by Eugenio Lilli, January 18, 2013; US Department of State, “Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations FY2010, Volume II,” 2009, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/124072.pdf>.

<sup>192</sup> Social and political unrest in Egypt predated the January uprising. The protests that followed the June 2010 murder of Khaled Said at the hand of the police, the irregularities reported in the November/December 2010 parliamentary elections, and the deadly explosion of a bomb outside an Alexandria Christian Coptic church in the first hour of 2011 were only some of the major precursors to the eventual outbreak of the January mass demonstrations.

to the three decade-old emergency laws,<sup>193</sup> the dissolution of the parliament,<sup>194</sup> a two-term limit to the presidency, a minimum wage, and the resignation of the despised minister of interior.<sup>195</sup> Demonstrators were also dissatisfied with the country's foreign policy. The Mubarak regime was seen by its critics as a local contractor for the United States and as such incapable of taking independent decisions in foreign affairs. A distinct aspect of the 2011 Egyptian uprising was a resurgence of nationalism that called on Egypt to regain its leading role in the Middle East. However, anti-American sentiments, although present among Egyptians, did not drive the demonstrations. On the contrary, Egyptian protesters were generally demonstrating in favor of cherished American ideas such as freedom and democracy.<sup>196</sup>

The Obama administration was clearly caught off guard by the first demonstrations in Egypt. From the US State Department, Secretary Clinton declared:

*"We support the fundamental right of expression and assembly for all people, and we urge that all parties exercise restraint and refrain from violence. But our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people."*<sup>197</sup>

The US administration's confidence in President Mubarak's ability to address the unrest was soon reaffirmed by the White House. A few days later, amidst continuing protests, US Vice-President Joe Biden commented: "Mubarak has been an ally of ours in a number of things and he has been very responsible [...] I would not refer to him as a dictator." The US Department of Defense concurred and, after highlighting the healthy status of the longstanding US bilateral relationship with Egypt, noted that "senior Egyptian military leaders" were currently at the Pentagon for the annual US-Egyptian defense talks. These early official statements do not reflect only a desire by the United States to retain a long-time ally but they also show that the Obama administration had not initially

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<sup>193</sup> The emergency laws had been on in the country since the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981.

<sup>194</sup> The current parliament that had been formed after the November-December 2010 elections; elections widely criticized for the widespread irregularities observed during the campaign period and polling process.

<sup>195</sup> Demonstrators were especially resentful toward the institution of the Ministry of Interior because of the repressive tactics employed by and the perceived unaccountability of Egypt's security forces.

<sup>196</sup> The Washington Post, "Egypt's Unstable Regime," January 25, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/25/AR2011012506315.html>; Shadi Hamid, "Egypt: The Prize," in *The Arab Awakening* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011); Indyk, Lieberthal, and O'Hanlon, *Bending History: Barack Obama's Foreign Policy*.

<sup>197</sup> Hillary Clinton, "Remarks With Spanish Foreign Minister Trinidad Jimenez After Their Meeting," January 25, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/01/155280.htm>.

grasped the magnitude of what was happening in Egypt. US officials probably thought that Mubarak's rule was not in danger.<sup>198</sup>

On January 28, after violent clashes between demonstrators and Egyptian security forces left hundreds injured and dozens dead, US President Obama had his first call with his Egyptian counterpart. The US president called upon both "the Egyptian authorities" and "those protesting in the streets" to refrain from violence. Obama told President Mubarak "to take concrete steps and actions that deliver" on the promise of democratic and economic reform. The US president then concluded: "the United States will continue to stand up for the rights of the Egyptian people and work with their government in pursuit of a future that is more just, more free, and more hopeful." The Obama administration's plan to work with the Mubarak regime received strong criticism from the Egyptian opposition. Mohammed ElBaradei, a former director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency and a prominent Egyptian opposition figure, made clear that "the American government cannot ask the Egyptian people to believe that a dictator who has been in power for 30 years will be the one to implement democracy." President Obama's inclination to work with the current Egyptian leadership was at odds with the protesters' increasing resolve that Mubarak had to go.<sup>199</sup>

Calls for President Mubarak to resign topped the protesters' agenda during the large demonstration, deemed the March of Millions, that the Egyptian opposition staged in Cairo on February 1. On that day, Vice-President Biden, Secretary of State Clinton, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Michael Mullen, National Security Adviser Tom Donilon, and Ambassador to Egypt Margaret Scobey, on the video conference screen, joined President Obama in the White House Situation Room to discuss the Egyptian crisis. The Obama team listened to President Mubarak publicly announcing on state television not to stand for re-election but plainly refusing to step down. After Mubarak's speech Obama had a second, and last, call with the Egyptian president. The conversation was reportedly tense. The US president contended that Mubarak had not gone far enough with his speech. Mubarak replied "you don't understand the Egyptian culture and what would happen if I step down now [...] You are young." The Egyptian president played on the US concern that an end to his leadership would pave the way to the rise to

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<sup>198</sup> Joe Biden, "Biden: Mubarak Is Not a Dictator, But People Have a Right to Protest- PBS Interview," January 27, 2011, [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/jan-june11/biden\\_01-27.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/jan-june11/biden_01-27.html); Geoff Morrell, "DOD News Briefing with Geoff Morrell from the Pentagon 26/01/2011" (US Department of Defense, January 26, 2011), <http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4758>.

<sup>199</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Situation in Egypt 28/01/2011," January 28, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/28/remarks-president-situation-egypt>; Phil Stewart and David Morgan, "ElBaradei Urges the U.S. to Abandon Mubarak," *Reuters*, January 30, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/01/30/us-egypt-usa-elbaradei-idUSTRE70T30920110130>.

power of anti-American forces. However, President Obama did not seem particularly impressed by Mubarak's arguments and later that evening publicly declared: "[it] is my belief that an orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now."<sup>200</sup>

By then, there was general consensus within the US administration that an "orderly transition", that is a top-down process of reforms overseen by the Egyptian government, was essential to find a viable solution to the crisis in Egypt. Nevertheless, some officials in the US administration considered Obama's formula "the transition must begin now" to be too aggressive. After President Obama's remarks the US Department of State cautioned that Mubarak's immediate resignation might complicate, rather than clear, Egypt's transition to democracy. Secretary Clinton, at a security conference in Munich, Germany, conceded that a transition to democracy "takes some time. I mean there are certain things that have to be done in order to prepare" and warned about the risk that some forces "will try to derail or overtake the process to pursue their own specific agenda."<sup>201</sup>

During the frantic days of January/February 2011, diverging opinions were competing for influence within the Obama administration. On one side, the US State and Defense departments were very invested in the bilateral relationship between the United States and Egypt and wanted to salvage whatever they could of this relationship. President Mubarak was expendable; that was not necessarily the problem. What mattered the most was the broader relationship with the Egyptian regime. The Department of State feared that the sudden fall of President Mubarak would cast a shadow of uncertainty on the future of US-Egyptian cooperation on the strategic issues of the Arab-Israeli peace process, counterterrorism, and the containment of Iran. Would a new Egyptian leadership honor the provisions of the 1979 peace treaty with Israel? Would a new president be as collaborative as Mubarak was in dealing with terrorist suspects and terrorist organizations, including the Hamas government in Gaza? Would he maintain President Mubarak's hard stance toward the theocratic regime in Tehran? The Department of Defense, for its part, worried that a mismanaged power transition would jeopardize the hitherto favorable treatment enjoyed by the US armed forces to obtain transit rights through Egyptian airspace and waterways, especially US privileged access to the Suez Canal. Moreover, the Department of Defense expressed the concern of US arms manufacturers that an abrupt end of the Mubarak regime could result into the disruption of

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<sup>200</sup> Helene Cooper and Robert F. Worth, "In Arab Spring, Obama Finds a Sharp Test," *The New York Times*, September 24, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/25/us/politics/arab-spring-proves-a-harsh-test-for-obamas-diplomatic-skill.html?ref=egypt&pagewanted=all>; Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Situation in Egypt 01/02/2011," February 1, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/01/remarks-president-situation-egypt>.

<sup>201</sup> Hillary Clinton, "Question and Answer Session at the Munich Security Conference," February 5, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/02/156045.htm>.

the profitable contracts existing between such US companies and the Egyptian government. In fact, according to a Congressional Research Service report “approximately 30% of [the annual \$1.3 billion of US bilateral military] aid to Egypt is spent on new weapons systems, as Egypt’s defense modernization plan is designed to gradually replace most of Egypt’s older Soviet weaponry with U.S. equipment.” In order to protect such realist and socio-economic interests, officials at the State and Defense departments advocated for a more pragmatic policy toward the Egyptian uprising and seemed particularly comfortable with the idea of a slow managed transition under Egyptian Vice-President Omar Suleiman or the military. Suleiman represented an especially acceptable candidate for the United States to succeed President Mubarak because he was known in the United States for his ardent anti-Islamism, his willingness to talk and act tough on Iran, and his previous cooperation with the CIA as chief of the Egyptian General Intelligence Service. A member of the Egyptian military was also considered an acceptable solution for a presidential succession. The United States, in fact, had a longstanding and cooperative relationship with the Egyptian armed forces dating back to the late 1970s.<sup>202</sup> For these reasons, Suleiman and the military were seen in Washington as suitable candidates to secure continuity in US-Egyptian relations.<sup>203</sup>

On the other side, the National Security Council (NSC) saw the Egyptian uprising as a colored revolution, like those occurred in the former Soviet Union and the Balkans in the early 2000s. Officials in the NSC considered the popular uprising a unique opportunity to promote the US ideal interests of freedom and democracy in Egypt and beyond. They were using the rhetoric about being on the right side of history and of not fighting the tide of change. The NSC supported the Egyptian uprising and advocated for a rapid transition of power. Ultimately, the more ideological position of the National Security Council appeared to also be the position of President Barack Obama.<sup>204</sup>

In the meantime, a similar debate occurred in the US Congress. Some US lawmakers stressed the risks to US strategic interests deriving from the sudden overthrow of the Mubarak regime. Others, instead, pointed out the necessity to firmly stand with the Egyptian people yearning for freedom. Notably, US congressmen proved to be much more concerned than officials in the Obama

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<sup>202</sup> The relationship between the United States and the Egyptian armed forces is examined in more detail later on in this chapter.

<sup>203</sup> Jason Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the US-Egyptian Alliance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Jeremy Sharp, *Egypt in Transition* (Congressional Research Service, May 4, 2011), 9, <http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?docid=4e5c81712>; Jane Mayer, “Who Is Omar Suleiman?,” *The New Yorker*, January 29, 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/who-is-omar-suleiman>; Brown Nathan J., George Washington University Interview, interview by Eugenio Lilli, January 21, 2013; Dibble Elizabeth, US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Interview, interview by Eugenio Lilli, April 17, 2014.

<sup>204</sup> Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the US-Egyptian Alliance*; Brown Nathan J., George Washington University Interview; Dibble Elizabeth, US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Interview.



administration about the prospect of the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power in a post-Mubarak Egypt.<sup>205</sup> Such a concern was bipartisan as both Democrats and Republicans repeatedly expressed their skepticism about “the Muslim Brotherhood’s commitment to democracy”.<sup>206</sup>

Two events in particular were symptomatic of the existence of different opinions among officials in the US administration. First, the hesitation by US Press Secretary Robert Gibbs to clarify the meaning of President Obama’s February 1 remark that Mubarak had to step down “now”. Asked by journalists if “now” meant before or after the Egyptian presidential election scheduled for September 2011, Secretary Gibbs did not provide a straight answer. Second, the inconsistent statements by senior members of the administration regarding the decision to review US bilateral assistance to Egypt based on the Egyptian government’s response to the demonstrations. On January 28, Robert Gibbs said the United States was reviewing its assistance posture toward Egypt. Two days later, Secretary Clinton stated instead that no review was in progress. The mixed, and sometimes confused, signals coming from Washington drew criticisms from the Egyptian opposition. Protesters accused the United States of sacrificing concrete steps toward real change in favor of a familiar stability. Questioned about the US position toward the uprising Ibrahim Mustafa, a 42 year old Egyptian demonstrator, replied: “The people know [the United States] is supporting an illegitimate regime.”<sup>207</sup>

The mixed nature of the statements coming from Washington also prompted some major US allies in the Middle East to openly convey their concerns about US policy, although for the opposite reason. While, in fact, the Egyptian opposition criticized the United States for its continued support for the Mubarak regime, the governments of countries like Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were troubled by what they instead perceived as the Obama administration’s backing of Egypt’s opposition forces. Israel was especially worried about the possibility of the

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<sup>205</sup> There were at least two reasons why US policymakers deemed very plausible the possibility that Islamists affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood would go to power in Egypt in the event of the fall of the Mubarak regime. First, the Brotherhood was undoubtedly the most well-organized opposition group, having the advantage of over 80 years of political experience. Second, the Islamist group was the least delegitimized within the diverse anti-Mubarak opposition, not having been compromised either by cooperation with the old regime or by charges of being an agent of foreign powers.

<sup>206</sup> On the debates taking place in the US Congress see for example: Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives, “Recent Developments in Egypt and Lebanon: Implications for U.S. Policy and Allies in the Broader Middle East” (US Congress, February 9, 2011), <http://archives.republicans.foreignaffairs.house.gov/112/64483.pdf>.

<sup>207</sup> Robert Gibbs, “White House Press Briefing 02/02/2011,” February 2, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/02/press-briefing-press-secretary-robert-gibbs-222011>; Robert Gibbs, “White House Press Briefing 28/01/2011,” January 28, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/28/press-briefing-press-secretary-robert-gibbs-1282011>; Mark Landler, “Clinton Calls for ‘Orderly Transition’ in Egypt,” *The New York Times*, January 30, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/31/world/middleeast/31diplo.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/31/world/middleeast/31diplo.html?_r=1&); Kareem Fahim, Mark Landler, and Anthony Shadid, “West Backs Gradual Egyptian Transition,” *The New York Times*, February 5, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/world/middleeast/06egypt.html?pagewanted=all>.

Muslim Brotherhood seizing power in Egypt and the threat that such a scenario would represent for the continuation of the 1979 peace treaty. Over the years, successive Israeli governments had established a functioning working relationship with President Mubarak. A new Egyptian government controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood would threaten such a relationship. Israel, for example, feared that a Brotherhood-led government would be more sympathetic toward Hamas and therefore decide to loosen or terminate the blockade against the Gaza Strip. Saudi Arabia and to a lesser extent the UAE disliked the Egyptian Islamists as well. Their leaderships worried that an empowered Muslim Brotherhood could damage their religious legitimacy by presenting a model of Islamic law different from the Wahhabi tradition of an absolute monarchy. Saudi Arabia made no secret of its displeasure with President Obama's handling of the Egyptian crisis. After the eventual ousting of Mubarak the Saudis canceled two scheduled visits to the kingdom by Secretary of Defense Gates and Secretary of State Clinton. The official reason for the canceling was King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud's frail health, but some read it as a direct Saudi response to the United States' decision to "abandon" Egyptian president and US long-time ally Mubarak.<sup>208</sup>

During the days preceding Mubarak's departure, the Obama administration softened its rhetoric that a power transition in Egypt occurred immediately. The position of the United States coalesced into a plan for advocating an orderly transition under Vice-President Suleiman. The US plan, also supported by other international actors, required President Mubarak to transfer some powers to the vice-president without necessarily implying Mubarak's formal resignation. The US administration's apparent backtracking from President Obama's "the transition must begin now" previous statement was probably the result of the joint pressure for adopting a more cautious policy coming both from within the US government (State and Defense departments) and from foreign actors (Israel, Saudi Arabia, UAE). Despite US efforts, the plan for an orderly transition failed to stop the protests for mainly two reasons. First, it failed because of the evident incapacity, or unwillingness, of the Egyptian regime to give meaning and credibility to its promises of political and economic reform. Second, the plan was unsuccessful because the Egyptian opposition had by then made extremely clear that Mubarak's resignation was a *conditio sine qua non* for halting street demonstrations. In fact, the Egyptian regime's resort to indiscriminate violence against mostly peaceful demonstrators (as in the case of the "Battle of the Camel" in Cairo that resulted in three dead and 600 injured)

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<sup>208</sup> Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*; Echague, *The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings*; Trager Eric, The Washington Institute Interview.

along with the Egyptian president's repeated refusal to resign from office had the effect of increasing the opposition's resolve to outlast Mubarak.<sup>209</sup>

On the evening of February 10, confronted with continuing and mounting opposition, President Mubarak gave a public speech to address the nation. Millions of Egyptians gathered in front of radios and TV sets to listen to what almost everybody expected to be a farewell address. They were soon to be disappointed. In a typical paternalistic tone Mubarak reaffirmed his position not to run again for the presidency, his intention to delegate powers to Vice-President Suleiman, his support for the introduction of genuine reforms but above all his commitment to "adhere to the decision of shouldering the responsibility in defending the constitution and the national interest of the people until the transfer of power." Once again, Mubarak had refused to resign and since he was widely expected to do so, his stubbornness to cling to power enraged many Egyptians. According to sources from within the Cairo presidential palace, members of Mubarak's inner circle, and his son Gamal in particular, convinced the Egyptian president that he could still ride out the turmoil.<sup>210</sup>

Following Mubarak's speech, President Obama released a statement that exposed the growing frustration of the US administration with the inability of the Egyptian regime to take the necessary steps to restore stability in the country:

*"The Egyptian people have been told that there was a transition of authority, but it is not yet clear that this transition is immediate, meaningful, or sufficient. Too many Egyptians remain unconvinced that the government is serious about a genuine transition to democracy, and it is the responsibility of the government to speak clearly to the Egyptian people and the world. The Egyptian government must put forward a credible, concrete, and unequivocal path toward genuine democracy, and they have not yet seized that opportunity."* Obama added: *"the Egyptian people have made it clear that there is no going back to the way things were*

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<sup>209</sup> Lisa Hajjar, "Suleiman: The CIA's Man in Cairo," *Al-Jazeera*, February 7, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/02/201127114827382865.html>; David D. Kirkpatrick and Kareem Fahim, "Mubarak's Allies and Foes Clash in Egypt," *The New York Times*, February 2, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/03/world/middleeast/03egypt.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/03/world/middleeast/03egypt.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1); Al Jazeera, "Protesters Flood Egypt Streets," February 2, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/02/20112113115442982.html>.  
<sup>210</sup> Hosni Mubarak, "Full Text of Mubarak's Speech - CNN.com," February 10, 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/02/10/egypt.mubarak.statement/>; The Associated Press, "Gamal Mubarak Behind Leader's Surprise Attempt to Retain Power," *The Australian*, February 13, 2011, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/gamal-mubarak-behind-leaders-surprise-attempt-to-retain-power/story-e6frg6so-1226005194176>; David Kenner, "The Egyptian Revolution Through Mubarak's Eyes," *Foreign Policy*, January 24, 2013, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/01/24/the\\_egyptian\\_revolution\\_through\\_hosni\\_mubarak\\_s\\_eyes?page=0,0](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/01/24/the_egyptian_revolution_through_hosni_mubarak_s_eyes?page=0,0).

*[...] and they must know that they will continue to have a friend in the United States of America.*”<sup>211</sup>

The tone of Obama’s words was different from previous US official remarks and mirrored the US administration’s increased concern that continued instability in Egypt would have negative repercussions on US interests in the region. Despite a change in tone, US position remained ambiguous and not even this time did President Obama go so far as to publicly call on Mubarak to step down -and notably, the US president never would.

On February 11, huge numbers of Egyptians poured into the streets to stage new demonstrations demanding Mubarak’s resignation. Meanwhile, the Egyptian president and his family left Cairo and flew to a presidential palace in the Red Sea resort location of Sharm el-Sheik. At 6 p.m. Vice-President Suleiman made an unexpected appearance on national television to announce that Mubarak had relinquished the office of the presidency and had empowered the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to administer the country’s affairs. Hosni Mubarak’s thirty-year rule of Egypt had suddenly come to an end.<sup>212</sup>

After Vice-President Suleiman announced Mubarak’s resignation, President Obama welcomed the news from the Grand Foyer of the White House:

*“there are very few moments in our lives where we have the privilege to witness history taking place. This is one of those moments. This is one of those times. The people of Egypt have spoken, their voices have been heard, and Egypt will never be the same.”* Obama then promised: *“the United States will continue to be a friend and partner to Egypt. We stand ready to provide whatever assistance is necessary -and asked for- to pursue a credible transition to a democracy.”*<sup>213</sup>

The US administration was especially comfortable with the idea of the SCAF acting as a midwife during the transition to democracy. US officials had repeatedly asserted the desirability of the Egyptian military playing a constructive role in solving the political stalemate. Such a solution, in fact, seemed to guarantee the continuation of good US-Egyptian relations in a post-Mubarak Egypt.

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<sup>211</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement of President Barack Obama on Egypt 10/02/2011,” February 10, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/10/statement-president-barack-obama-egypt>.

<sup>212</sup> Omar Suleiman, “CNN: Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak Steps down - YouTube,” February 11, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fD8f36JUlhm>; The Guardian, “Mubarak Resigns -Friday 11 February,” February 11, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/blog/2011/feb/11/egypt-hosni-mubarak-left-cairo>.

<sup>213</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on Egypt 11/02/2011,” February 11, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/11/remarks-president-egypt>.

The early decision by the SCAF to publicly announce its commitment to honor Egypt's international obligations (an implicit reference to the 1979 peace treaty with Israel) and to transfer power to a democratically elected government only reinforced this US perception. The United States had a time-honored relationship with the Egyptian armed forces. Military-to-military contacts and cooperation in a number of strategic areas had been commonplace since the late 1970s. In addition, the Obama administration had been in close contact with the SCAF since the very beginning of the uprising. As noted before, on January 25, senior Egyptian military officers were at the Pentagon when they were reached by the news of the protests and rushed back to Egypt. During the two-week uprising US officials praised time and again the stabilizing role of the Egyptian armed forces. Illustrative of this US attitude toward the Egyptian armed forces was a comment made by US Secretary of Defense Gates on February 8:

*"I think that the Egyptian military has conducted itself in an exemplary fashion during this entire episode. And they have acted with great restraint. And frankly, they have done everything that we have indicated we would hope that they would do. So I would say that they have made a contribution to the evolution of democracy and what we are seeing in Egypt."*

According to some reports, Secretary Gates also had a conversation at the phone (the fifth since January 25) with his Egyptian counterpart, Field Marshal Tantawi, the night right before Mubarak's resignation. The chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Representative Lleana Ros-Lehtinen, publicly acknowledged that "it has been reported that the United States is working behind the scenes to impress upon the Egyptian military the need to protect protestors and support a peaceful government transition." Given the above, the possibility that the actions of the SCAF were taken in coordination with Washington cannot be completely dismissed.<sup>214</sup>

In his February 10 speech, Hosni Mubarak said he would remain the Egyptian president and supervise the transfer of power until the September presidential election. The day after Mubarak decided to step down. What could have possibly made the Egyptian President change his mind in less than 24 hours?

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<sup>214</sup> Charles Levinson, Margaret Coker, and Matt Bradley, "Fall of Mubarak Shakes Middle East," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703786804576137543866154926.html>; BBC, "Egyptian Military Dissolves Parliament," February 13, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12443678>; Robert Gates, "Media Availability with Secretary Gates and Minister Juppé from the Pentagon 08/02/2011" (US Department of Defense, February 8, 2011), <http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4766>; Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*; Kinninmont Jane, Chatham House Interview; Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives, "Recent Developments in Egypt and Lebanon: Implications for U.S. Policy and Allies in the Broader Middle East," 69.

There is general consensus that President Mubarak's eventual resignation was primarily the result of domestic pressure. In this sense, the hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions of Egyptians calling for irreversible change that took to the streets from late January to early February 2011 undoubtedly played a decisive role. Equally important was the Egyptian military's decision to take a somewhat neutral stance between the regime and the protesters. In more than one occasion, the armed forces declared that they would not "resort to use force against our great people," that they acknowledged "the legitimacy of [the people's] demands," and that "freedom of expression through peaceful means" would be guaranteed to everybody. Had the armed forces decided to stand squarely with the Mubarak regime and to crack down on the protesters, the popular uprising alone may not have been able to overthrow the Egyptian president.<sup>215</sup>

Prior to the 2011 uprising the relationship between Hosni Mubarak and the Egyptian military was complicated. Although Mubarak was a product of the military, having been a career officer in the air force, there were a number of reasons why the armed forces had come to resent his rule. First, there was the issue of the Mubarak regime's program of economic reforms. Senior influential members of the Egyptian military despised economic liberalization from a very nationalistic point of view. In their opinion foreign investment and privatization were tantamount to selling Egypt's soil. Along with nationalistic concerns, the armed forces also resented economic liberalization for a more practical reason: it allowed private actors to compete with the military's vested interests in the country's economy. Another source of discontent originated from the perception that President Mubarak was planning to hand over power to his son Gamal. The armed forces distrusted Gamal Mubarak because of his lack of a military background, his strong association with economic reforms, and his preferential relations with business and political, rather than military, elites. Third, the Egyptian military resented the Mubarak regime's decision to establish a closer relationship with the Interior Ministry and security forces, whose budgets and influence, as a consequence, had increased significantly. Finally, the military in Egypt has consistently considered itself an independent organization whose loyalty primarily lies in the state and not in the institution of the presidency. All these reasons help to explain the position of the Egyptian armed forces during the uprising and why they did not firmly side with President Mubarak.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*; David D. Kirkpatrick, "Mubarak's Grip on Power Is Shaken," *The New York Times*, January 31, 2011, sec. World / Middle East, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/01/world/middleeast/01egypt.html>; Katerina Dalacoura, "The 2011 Uprisings in the Arab Middle East: Political Change and Geopolitical Implications," *International Affairs* 88, no. 1 (January 2012): 63–79.

<sup>216</sup> Lisa Anderson, "Demystifying the Arab Spring: Parsing the Differences Between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 3 (June 2011); Jack A. Goldstone, "Understanding the Revolutions of 2011: Weakness and

Throughout the crisis, the military grew increasingly concerned with the continued deteriorating security situation in the country. By the day President Mubarak announced his resignation, around 800 people had died and 6,000 more had been injured in uprising-related incidents. It was probably on the previous night of February 10 that the armed forces gave Mubarak the so-called “knock on the door” and finally convinced the president to step down. A senior Egyptian general later recalled: “We gave Mubarak a chance to fix the deteriorating situation, but he could not. So we had to intervene.”<sup>217</sup>

Compared to the combined pressure coming from the domestic opposition and the Egyptian armed forces the role of the United States in Mubarak’s departure was only secondary. The Egyptian uprising evidenced that the leverage of the United States on Egypt’s domestic politics was indeed limited. All along, the Obama administration had been reacting to ever-changing events rather than shaping them. Every US policy statement seemed to be too little too late compared to what was occurring in Egypt. Eventually, the decision to oust Mubarak was taken by the Egyptians and Washington simply came to terms with it. Some observers have suggested that the United States could have used its bilateral foreign assistance as a tool to influence the decisions of the Egyptian leadership. This argument neglects the fact that however significant, the importance of US bilateral aid was not huge in context. To begin with, in the 2000s the Egyptian economy was growing and it was moving from an aid-dependent economy to an investment-based economy. Thus, aid was less relevant during the latter Mubarak years than it used to be in the past. Furthermore, US aid had been about \$2 billion in nominal terms since the 1980s so in real terms its actual value had probably decreased. Finally, in 2011, European and Persian Gulf countries, not the United States, were arguably the major external props of the Egyptian economy. In addition to these economic considerations and along with a strong political interest in not jeopardizing its strategic relationship with the Egyptian leadership, the Obama administration was also wary of halting US aid to Egypt for domestic reasons. In fact, a halt to US aid, especially military aid, would have had negative repercussions for the profit of those US companies (some of them very influential within the US Department of Defense) that did business with the Egyptian government. As a consequence, the

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Resilience of Middle Eastern Autocracies,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 3 (June 2011); Pollack, “Understanding the Arab Awakening.”

<sup>217</sup> BBC, “Egypt: Cairo’s Tahrir Square Fills with Protesters,” July 8, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14075493>; International Crisis Group, *Lost in Transition: The World According to Egypt’s SCAF*, Middle East/North Africa Report, April 24, 2012, 20, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/Egypt/121-lost-in-transition-the-world-according-to-egypts-scaf.pdf>.

ability of the Obama administration to use US bilateral assistance as an effective lever to influence Egyptian domestic politics should not be overestimated.<sup>218</sup>

### Continuity or Change

The Egyptian uprising presented the Obama administration with a difficult choice between conflicting US national interests. On the one hand, there was an overwhelmingly peaceful popular movement demanding social, political, and economic reforms. Support for this opposition movement would have contributed to the promotion of the longstanding US ideal interest of spreading democracy and freedom in the Greater Middle East. On the other hand, there was Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a loyal and valuable US ally. Siding with President Mubarak would have guaranteed the continuation of US-Egyptian cooperation in protecting major US strategic interests in the region, particularly the security of Israel, the containment of Iran, and US regional policies of counterterrorism and non-proliferation.

This analysis has showed that the Egyptian uprising caught the Obama administration off guard and that the United States had not off-the-shelf plan to deal with such a contingency. US response to the uprising seemed always a step behind the events taking place in the country: for example, the US administration was counting on the Mubarak regime to implement meaningful reforms when protesters on the streets had already made abundantly clear they wanted Mubarak to go. US response was also characterized by mixed and sometimes confused messages coming from US officials: exemplary was the debate surrounding the meaning of President Obama's remark "an orderly transition must begin now". Along with the fact that the US administration was unprepared for the event of Egyptian President Mubarak's sudden departure, other reasons lay behind the hesitant and ambivalent nature of the US response to the uprising. First, the strategic importance of Egypt was paramount. Therefore, US officials were extremely wary of taking any decision that

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<sup>218</sup> International Crisis Group, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (i): Egypt Victorious?* (International Crisis Group, February 24, 2011), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/Egypt/101-Popular%20Protest%20in%20North%20Africa%20and%20the%20Middle%20East%20I%20-%20Egypt%20Victorious.pdf>; Jeremy Sharp, *Egypt: The January 25 Revolution and Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy 11/02/2011* (Congressional Research Service, February 11, 2011), <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/157112.pdf>; Jeremy Sharp, *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations 06/12/2012* (Congressional Research Service, December 6, 2012), <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/201971.pdf>; Alexis Sowa, *Aid to Egypt by the Numbers* (Center for Global Development, July 19, 2013), <http://www.cgdev.org/blog/aid-egypt-numbers>; Gerges, *Obama and the Middle East*; Jon B. Alterman, *Middle East Notes and Comments: A Deeper Difference* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2014), [http://csis.org/files/publication/1114\\_MENC.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/1114_MENC.pdf).



would irremediably jeopardize the US time-honored relationship with the Egyptian leadership. Second, different opinions within the US executive branch and deep concerns of some US allied governments led to repeated adjustments and apparent backtrackings in the US position.

With regard to the US executive's internal dynamics, the State and Defense departments advocated for a more cautious approach toward the uprising while the president seemed more keen on throwing his support behind the protesters. However, despite the initial existence of divergent opinions among officials in Washington, the Obama administration eventually adopted the traditional US stance of favoring the protection of US strategic interests over the promotion of US ideal interests in the Greater Middle East. The United States' endorsement of political and economic reforms in Egypt was sincere but only to the extent that such an endorsement would not jeopardize the wider bilateral relationship with the Egyptian leadership. In this sense, two aspects of the US response to the Egyptian uprising are especially revealing. First, at the rhetorical level, President Obama never went so far as to publicly demand President Mubarak step down. Second, at the practical level, the domestic debate in the United States about reviewing US bilateral assistance to Egypt did not result in a decision to halt or reduce such an assistance. Contrary to the general wisdom that President Obama "abandoned" Mubarak, the United States decided to fully side with the protesters only at the very end. The Obama administration did so when it realized that the risks to the US national interest of standing by Mubarak were greater than those of easing him out and only after US officials understood that power in Egypt would be transferred to the military, an institution with which Washington had a time-tested cooperative relationship. All that considered, we can confidently argue that the Obama administration's response to the transformative events of the 2011 Egyptian uprising did not display any marked change to the policies of previous US administrations.

## The Kingdom of Bahrain: a Troubled Ally

### US-Bahraini Relations prior to 2011

At first glance, the Kingdom of Bahrain does not display the typical characteristics that would make it an especially relevant country for the United States. Bahrain, in fact, sits on a tiny archipelago of islands off the east coast of Saudi Arabia (its entire size is only three and a half times the size of Washington DC), has a very small population of 1.2 million people, and does not possess significant reserves of oil and natural gas. What makes Bahrain particularly important to the United States is the kingdom's location at the heart of the strategic region of the Persian Gulf.<sup>219</sup>

Military cooperation has undoubtedly been the cornerstone of the relationship between the United States and Bahrain. First military contacts began at the end of World War II and US military assets have been in Bahrain since 1948. Since then, the primary interlocutor of successive US administrations has been the Al Khalifa royal family.<sup>220</sup> After the British withdrawal and the Bahraini declaration of independence in 1971 the United States took over and became the major foreign power with a direct presence in the country. The revolutionary events of 1979 significantly stepped up the strategic importance of Bahrain as a bulwark against the perceived threat represented by the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran. In October 1991, seven months after the last Iraqi troops were ousted from Kuwait, the United States and Bahrain reportedly signed a ten-year defense treaty. The treaty was then renewed in October 2001, and was supposed to be renewed again in October 2011. However, according to some reports, it seems that the George W. Bush administration, after the shocking events of 11 September 2001, decided to extend the defense treaty for an additional five years, until 2016.<sup>221</sup> US-Bahraini military cooperation reached a higher level in March 2002 when US President G.W. Bush officially designed Bahrain as a major non-NATO ally. Such a privileged designation qualified Bahrain to purchase the same kind of US technologically-advanced weapons that only NATO members could otherwise acquire. The access

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<sup>219</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook," accessed September 11, 2014, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>; F. Gregory Gause III, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1994); Simon C. Smith, *Britain's Revival and Fall in the Gulf: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States, 1950-71* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004); Mehran Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East: A Political History Since the First World War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>220</sup> The Al Khalifas have ruled over Bahrain from as early as 1783.

<sup>221</sup> The exact details of the US-Bahraini defense treaty and its alleged extension could not be verified as they are still classified. Some provisions are discussed in Sami Hajjar, *U.S. Military Presence In The Gulf: Challenges And Prospects* (Strategic Studies Institute, March 2002), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub185.pdf>.

of US warships to Bahrain's naval facilities is another essential aspect of the US-Bahraini defense relationship. "Naval Support Activity Bahrain" is the name of a sprawling facility that covers over 100 acres and hosts about 5,000 US personnel, mostly from the US Navy, including the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet. The US Fifth Fleet has the specific responsibility to patrol the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the east coast of Africa. Along with naval assets, Bahrain also hosts a number of US Air Force personnel, at the Sheikh Isa Air Base, and special operations teams.<sup>222</sup>

Over the years, the presence of US military assets in Bahrain has proved critical to the pursuit of the US national interest in the Greater Middle East.

To begin with, US military presence in the archipelago has guaranteed US access to Middle Eastern energy resources, a major US strategic interest in the region. As the largest suppliers of petroleum and natural gas in the entire world, the countries of the Persian Gulf (Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) are unrivaled. In 2011, the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) calculated Persian Gulf proved reserves of crude oil at 788 billion barrels, roughly 58 percent of the world's total reserves. During the same year the region produced an average of 25.5 million barrels of oil per day, thus accounting for about 29 percent of the world's entire production. As for natural gas, in 2011 Persian Gulf proved reserves were estimated at 2,623 trillion cubic feet (39 percent of the world's reserves) and the region's production was of 16,126 billion cubic feet (equal to 13 percent of the world's production). Furthermore, Persian Gulf oil is critical for at least other two reasons. First, the costs of oil exploration and production are far cheaper here than in any other region. Second, Persian Gulf countries possess more than 90 percent of the world's excess production capacity, that is the capability to fuel additional oil rapidly into the market in case of a sudden disruption. This large excess production capacity gives them the possibility to decisively influence world supplies and

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<sup>222</sup> Frederic Wehrey, *The Precarious Ally: Bahrain's Impasse and US Policy* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2013), [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/bahrain\\_impasse.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/bahrain_impasse.pdf); George W. Bush, "Presidential Determination on the Designation of Bahrain as a Major Non-Nato Ally -Number 2002-10," March 15, 2002, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/03/20020315-3.html>; Kenneth Katzman, *Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy 06/11/2012* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, November 6, 2012), [http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/95-1013\\_20121106.pdf](http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/95-1013_20121106.pdf); Associated France Press, "US-Bahrain Defense Pact Renewed," August 5, 2011, [http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5i2bp6IG\\_k4Yle2IKIPux76Qz1BAA?docId=CNG.b36a715ab130ce2bbcf6408109ec0b93.241](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5i2bp6IG_k4Yle2IKIPux76Qz1BAA?docId=CNG.b36a715ab130ce2bbcf6408109ec0b93.241).

market prices. US air and naval assets in Bahrain have therefore allowed the United States to secure the unhindered flow of such vital energy supplies from this strategic region to the world market.<sup>223</sup>

US-Bahraini military cooperation has also been beneficial to the US strategic interest of containing hostile powers in the Greater Middle East. For example, military installations in Bahrain served the US policy of “dual containment” of Iraq and Iran in the 1990s. Bahrain was part of the US-led coalition that expelled Iraq from Kuwait in 1991, Bahrain hosted US troops both during the 1991 war and during the following embargo, and US pilots flew combat missions from Bahraini bases in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. In a similar fashion, Bahrain has supported the US policy of containment of Iran. In particular, the Bahraini leadership has shared US concerns about Iran’s nuclear program and has strongly opposed the idea of Iran developing nuclear weapons. Moreover, US military presence in Bahrain has been a security guarantee against potential hostile Iranian actions targeting Persian Gulf countries. This has been especially true in the case of Bahrain where the royal family has intentionally used US presence to keep its more powerful neighbor in check. The Al Khalifas’ suspicion of Iranian intentions<sup>224</sup> originates from the fact that, over the past century, different leaders in Tehran have at times contested Bahrain’s sovereignty and publicly expressed claims to Bahrain’s territory.<sup>225</sup>

Countering terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction is another important US strategic interest in Bahrain. The US State Department’s Country Reports on Terrorism for 2010 credited Bahrain for having worked to actively counter terrorist finance, as well as for enhanced border control capabilities, for efforts to prevent acts of nuclear terrorism, and for having successfully prosecuted a number of terrorist suspect cases. Moreover, Naval Support Activity Bahrain has been used to coordinate the naval operations of Combined Task Force 151 and 152 whose main task is to interdict the movement of terrorist, arms, and weapons of mass destruction-

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<sup>223</sup> Joseph McMillan, “US Interests and Objectives,” in *The United States and the Persian Gulf*, Richard D. Sokolsky (ed) (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 2003), 16–17; US Energy Information Administration, “International Energy Statistics,” 2011, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/data.cfm>; Ronald Neumann, “Bahrain: A Very Complicated Little Island,” *Middle East Policy Council* XX, no. 4 (Winter 2013), <http://www.mepec.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/bahrain-very-complicated-little-island?print>; CQ Press, *The Middle East*, 153.

<sup>224</sup> The Islamic Republic of Iran was allegedly involved in two coup attempts to overthrow the Bahraini royal family in 1981 and 1996.

<sup>225</sup> Kenneth Katzman, *Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy* 26/04/2010 (Congressional Research Service, April 26, 2010), <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/142737.pdf>; Kenneth M. Pollack, “Securing the Gulf,” *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 4 (August 2003): 2–16; F. Gregory Gause III, “The Illogic of Dual Containment,” *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 2 (1994); Hillary Clinton, “Remarks with Foreign Minister Al Khalifa After Their Meeting 03/12/2010” (US Department of State, December 3, 2010), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/12/152327.htm>.

related technology across the Arabian Sea. US and Bahraini naval assets have also cooperated in anti-piracy operations throughout the region's waterways.<sup>226</sup>

Before the 2011 popular uprising the relationship between the Obama administration and the Al Khalifas was sound. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described it as "a time-tested relationship based on mutual interest and mutual respect." In similar terms, the Bahraini foreign minister stated that "The Kingdom of Bahrain and the United States of America share a historic, deep-rooted, and multifaceted relationship." Cooperation on the strategic issues of energy security, containment of Iran, and counterterrorism continued unhindered. In its Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations for fiscal year 2010, the Obama administration acknowledged that Bahraini military cooperation "contributes directly to the US Government's effort to maintain security in the Persian Gulf." The US administration also pursued policies to encourage democratic and economic reforms in the insular kingdom. As part of its attempt to promote reform the United States consistently invested political capital in support of Crown Prince Sheikh Salman who was considered by many US officials the leader of the moderate and pro-reform camp within the Al Khalifa royal family. The Obama administration's commitment to reform in Bahrain was reaffirmed once again by US Secretary Clinton after the kingdom held its parliamentary elections in October 2010:

*"as we know, the challenges of democratic governance do not end with elections. But I am impressed by the commitment that the government has to the democratic path that Bahrain is walking on [...] America will continue working with you to promote a vigorous civil society, and to ensure that democracy, human rights, and civil liberties are protected by the rule of law, because we view Bahrain as a model partner for not only the United States, but for so many countries that are looking to see the way that Bahrain decides about its future."*<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> US Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2010*, August 18, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2010/170257.htm>; Anthony H. Cordesman, *US State Department and Counter-Terrorism Center Reporting Terrorism in the Middle East and Central Asia, August 2010* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 29, 2011), [http://csis.org/files/publication/110629\\_US\\_State\\_Survey\\_MENA\\_Cent\\_Asia\\_Terrorism\\_2010.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/110629_US_State_Survey_MENA_Cent_Asia_Terrorism_2010.pdf); Kenneth Katzman, *Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy 21/02/2012* (Congressional Research Service, February 21, 2012), <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/185930.pdf>; Walter Pincus, "State Department Cables Detail U.S. Links to Bahrain," *The Washington Post*, February 22, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/21/AR2011022103251.html>.

<sup>227</sup> Hillary Clinton, "Remarks with Foreign Minister Al Khalifa After Their Meeting 03/02/2010" (US Department of State, February 3, 2010), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/02/136480.htm>; Simon Henderson, "Bahrain Boiling: Welcome to the Arab Revolt That Failed," *Foreign Policy*, September 23, 2011, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/09/23/bahrain\\_boiling?page=0,2](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/09/23/bahrain_boiling?page=0,2); Clinton, "Remarks with Foreign Minister Al Khalifa After Their Meeting 03/12/2010"; US Department of State, "Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations FY2010, Volume II."

## The Bahraini Uprising and US Response

Only two months after Secretary Clinton publicly praised the Bahraini government for being a model partner committed to democratic reform, popular protests broke out in the country.<sup>228</sup> On 14 February 2011, a few days after the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, over 6,000 people took to the streets and unauthorized demonstrations were held in the capital Manama and in other cities across the country. As it was the case in Egypt, the Bahraini uprising brought to light new opposition groups that made wide use of Internet-based social networks to mobilize support. These new groups, such as the February 14 Revolution Coalition, were leaderless networks whose members, mainly youth, were not affiliated with any traditional political organization and did not identify themselves along any particular religious, sectarian, or ideological line. At this early stage of the uprising, demonstrators were demanding political and economic reforms: more power for the elected parliament, an end to the practice of gerrymandering voting districts, respect for human rights, and better jobs and economic opportunities. These demands for reform were initially shared by both the Sunni and the Shiite communities in Bahrain. However, Bahraini Shiites, that represent the majority of the population in the archipelago,<sup>229</sup> were especially vocal in their criticism of the minority Sunni royal family. Shiites in Bahrain, in fact, has long felt treated as second-class citizens deprived of their proportionate share of political power and economic wealth. Popular protests immediately met the resistance of Bahraini security forces that used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the peaceful crowds. During the first day of confrontations with the police one demonstrator was reportedly killed and tens more were injured.<sup>230</sup>

The first reactions of the Obama administration were cautious but unambiguous. The White House and the State Department issued statements reaffirming that the United States supported the

<sup>228</sup> The 2011 uprising emerged as the latest manifestation of a long history of contentious politics in Bahrain. The 1990s, for example, were a time of large violent protests. The situation seemed to cool off when King Hamad came to power in 1999 with a program of reforms. After some initial promising steps, however, the royal family proved reluctant to continue on the path of reform and in 2010 the non-governmental organization Human Rights Watch warned that the rule of the Al-Khalifas was moving back to “full-blown authoritarianism”. Human Rights Watch, “Bahrain: Elections to Take Place Amid Crackdown,” October 20, 2010, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2010/10/20/bahrain-elections-take-place-amid-crackdown>.

<sup>229</sup> Estimates of the Shiite population in Bahrain vary from 60 to 75 percent. An exact estimate is made difficult by the absence of official data and by the decade-long policy of naturalization of Arab and non-Arab Sunnis promoted by the Bahraini government. See: Marina Ottaway, *Bahrain: Between the United States and Saudi Arabia* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 4, 2011), <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2011/04/04/bahrain-between-united-states-and-saudi-arabia/t8>; Justin Gengler, “Facts on the Ground: A Reliable Estimate of Bahrain’s Sunni-Shi’i Balance, and Evidence of Demographic Engineering,” *Religion and Politics in Bahrain*, April 5, 2011, <http://bahrainipolitics.blogspot.co.uk/2011/04/facts-on-ground-reliable-estimate-of.html>.

<sup>230</sup> Al Jazeera, “Bahrain Activists in ‘Day of Rage,’” February 14, 2011, [www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/02/2011214925802473.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/02/2011214925802473.html); Michael S. Doran and Salman Shaikh, “Bahrain: Island of Troubles,” in *The Arab Awakening* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011); Jane Kinninmont, *Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse* (London: Chatham House, June 2012); Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*.

people's rights to protest peacefully, to freedom of expression, and to freedom of assembly. Moreover, the Obama administration stressed that violence and coercion should not be the way governments respond to peaceful demonstrations. US President Barack Obama personally urged the Bahraini government "to get ahead of change" and not to lag "behind the curve".<sup>231</sup>

Clashes between protesters and security forces continued in the following days. Although demonstrators worked hard to describe their mobilization as non-sectarian, it was a fact that the large majority of anti-government protesters were Shiites whereas the majority of people participating in pro-government rallies were Sunnis. On February 17, Bahraini security forces stormed Manama's Pearl Roundabout where the opposition had set up a tent camp. The violent clearing out of Pearl Roundabout resulted in four people dead and many others injured. Rising tensions on the streets went hand in hand with a gradual radicalization of the slogans chanted during the demonstrations. Initial calls for political and economic reforms turned into more explicit demands for regime change with some minority groups even demanding the establishment of a republic. Faced by increasing opposition Bahraini King Hamad entrusted the crown prince with the task of starting a national dialogue with the opposition. Meanwhile, first violent confrontations along Shiite-Sunni sectarian lines were reported in early March.<sup>232</sup>

The incident at Pearl Roundabout elicited the condemnation of the White House. On the same day, Secretary of State Clinton called the Bahraini foreign minister to express "deep concerns about the actions of the security forces." Secretary Clinton also exhorted the Bahraini government to show restraint and engage in "a process that will result in real meaningful changes for the people." In its response to the Bahraini uprising the Obama administration had to struck a difficult balance between the ideal interest of supporting peaceful demonstrations demanding political and economic reforms and the strategic interest of preserving its valuable partnership with the Al Khalifa royal family, a longtime US ally. As a result, US official statements constantly swung between mild criticisms of state repression and public reassurances about the solidity of the US-Bahraini relationship. In addition to the White House and the State Department, such a position toward the uprising was also adopted by the US military and US Defense Department. During a visit to Bahrain, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen decried the ongoing violence in the

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<sup>231</sup> Philip Crowley, "Daily Press Briefing 14/02/2011" (US Department of State, February 14, 2011), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2011/02/156557.htm>; Barack Obama, "Press Conference by the President 15/02/2011" (The White House, February 15, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/15/press-conference-president>.

<sup>232</sup> Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, November 23, 2011, <http://files.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf>; Wehrey, *The Precarious Ally: Bahrain's Impasse and US Policy*; Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*.

country whilst simultaneously praising Bahraini leaders “for the very measured way they have been handling the popular crisis”. Chairman Mullen also reaffirmed the US “strong commitment to [the] military relationship with the Bahraini defense forces.” Similarly, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates told the Bahraini king and the crown prince that “baby steps” toward reform were not enough to meet their people’s political and economic grievances. However, Secretary Gates also reiterated the healthy condition of the US-Bahraini alliance and conveyed his conviction that the Al Khalifas were serious about implementing “real reform” to address the opposition’s demands.<sup>233</sup>

The Bahraini government’s half-hearted promises of reform did not stop the opposition staging new demonstrations. The security situation in Bahrain was rapidly deteriorating and state security forces seemed unable to restore law and order. An overwhelmed Bahraini royal family, fearing for its own very survival, requested the help of its Gulf neighbors. The organization of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), of which Bahrain is a member, agreed to send troops to assist the embattled Al Khalifas. Starting on March 14, around 2000 troops, mostly from Saudi Arabia but also from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, entered Bahrain under the banner of the Peninsula Shield Force with the double task of protecting key sites and infrastructure, and of defending Bahrain from any possible foreign intervention. Kuwait sent naval forces to patrol and secure Bahrain’s maritime borders.<sup>234</sup>

Before King Hamad sent his official request for assistance to the GCC, Crown Prince Sheikh Salman had been engaged in frenzied talks with the Bahraini traditional opposition (especially with members of the Shiite political society Al Wefaq) to find a negotiated solution to the crisis.<sup>235</sup> Both sides in the negotiations had credibility issues: the crown prince represented a regime that had repeatedly broken its reform promises whereas Al Wefaq and its partners were not in a position to guarantee that the larger Bahraini opposition would accept the terms of a possible agreement. The

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<sup>233</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement by the President on Violence in Bahrain, Libya and Yemen 18/02/2011” (The White House, February 18, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/18/statement-president-violence-bahrain-libya-and-yemen-0>; Hillary Clinton, “Remarks With General James E. Cartwright, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 17/02/2011” (US Department of State, February 17, 2011), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/02/156761.htm>; Donna Miles, “Mullen Reaffirms American-Bahraini Alliance” (American Forces Press Service, February 25, 2011), <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=62934>; Karen Parrish, “Gates Visits Bahrain to Urge Reform Dialogue” (American Forces Press Service, March 11, 2011), <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=63132>; Karen Parrish, “Gates Calls for Mideast Reform” (American Forces Press Service, March 12, 2011), <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=63143>.

<sup>234</sup> Bassiouni, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*; Al Jazeera, *Bahrain: Shouting In The Dark*, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xaTKDMYOBOU>; Ethan Bronner and Michael Slackman, “Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest,” *The New York Times*, March 14, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15bahrain.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15bahrain.html?_r=1&).

<sup>235</sup> As political parties are officially banned in the Kingdom of Bahrain, the traditional opposition is organized in “political societies” that primarily act as political parties for electoral purposes.



inability of the two parties to agree on a consensual framework for national dialogue paved the way for the GCC military intervention and it also had significant effects on the distribution of power both within the government and the opposition. On the one hand, the crown prince's failure to strike an agreement with the opposition weakened the reformist camp within the royal family while it empowered its more reactionary members. On the other hand, the traditional opposition, like Al Wefaq, lost credibility in the eyes of the protesters because of its policy of engagement with the government. They were accused of legitimizing the regime without being able to receive any significant reform in exchange. The fact that hardliners in both camps had gained the upper-hand only made the possibility of a future political compromise even more unlikely.<sup>236</sup>

During the days preceding the deployment of the Peninsula Shield Force in and around Bahrain, the position of the Obama administration coalesced into a policy of support for the crown prince's initiative to start a national dialogue with the opposition. The State Department "stressed the need to seriously engage all sectors of society in a constructive, consultative dialogue to meet the way forward in accordance with the aspirations of the people." In a similar fashion, the Defense Department encouraged "national dialogue". Finally, the White House, as late as March 13, was still exhorting "the government of Bahrain to pursue a peaceful and meaningful dialogue with the opposition rather than resorting to the use of force." Moreover, US officials directly engaged in diplomatic actions aimed at facilitating a political solution to the Bahraini uprising. On March 11 and March 14 respectively, Secretary of Defense Gates and Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman were in Bahrain to help broker a compromise between the Al Khalifas and the opposition. There were also news reports of a personal call by President Obama to Saudi King Abdullah where the US president asked the Saudi monarch to refrain from sending troops to Bahrain. However, the Obama administration's efforts to advance a political solution to the crisis failed and, on March 14, GCC troops began to enter Bahrain. After the news of the military intervention reached Washington, the White House declared that the US administration had been previously informed of the GCC decision.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Kinninmont, *Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse*; Ulrichsen Kristian Coates, Chatham House Interview, interview by Eugenio Lilli, October 25, 2012; Wehrey, *The Precarious Ally: Bahrain's Impasse and US Policy*.

<sup>237</sup> Clinton, "Remarks With General James E. Cartwright, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 17/02/2011"; Parrish, "Gates Visits Bahrain to Urge Reform Dialogue"; The White House, "Statement from the Press Secretary on Violence in Yemen and Bahrain," March 13, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/13/statement-press-secretary-violence-yemen-and-bahrain>; Jay Carney, "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 3/15/2011" (The White House, March 15, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/15/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-3152011>; Elisabeth Bumiller, "Defense Chief Is on Mission to Mend Saudi Relations," *The New York Times*, April 6, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/07/world/middleeast/07military.html?ref=bahrain>; Mark C. Toner, "Daily Press Briefing 16/03/2011" (US Department of State, March 16, 2011), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2011/03/158427.htm#BAHRAIN>.

The role of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is especially important to understand the development of the Bahraini uprising and the US response to it. To begin with, Saudi Arabia has a significant political, economic, and security leverage over Bahrain to the extent that there is a widespread perception that critical decisions about Bahrain's future are not taken in Manama but in Riyadh. Moreover, the Saudi royal family is plausibly the most important Persian Gulf ally of the United States. Therefore, the Obama administration inevitably had to take into account Saudi concerns and preferences when framing its policy response toward the crisis in Bahrain. As it occurred with regard to the Egyptian uprising, US and Saudi preferred policy-options in Bahrain differed significantly. While the United States advocated for a national dialogue, Saudi Arabia favored a military intervention. Saudi intransigence over the Bahraini issue was well exemplified by a Saudi official who reportedly described Bahrain as the "reddest of red lines". There were two main reasons why Saudi Arabia was particularly worried about unrest in Bahrain. First, Saudi leaders feared that a Shiite takeover of the small archipelago would allow its nemesis Iran to set up camp at the kingdom's doorstep. Second, Riyadh was afraid that reforms in Bahrain would have negative repercussions on Saudi domestic politics insofar as such reforms would encourage Shiites and Sunni liberals in Saudi Arabia to raise similar demands. The deployment of the Peninsula Shield Force was meant to send one message to the Bahraini opposition, that the Bahraini government had the total support of Riyadh, and another message to foreign powers, particularly the United States, that Saudi Arabia would not tolerate any Egypt-like change to the status quo in a neighboring country.<sup>238</sup>

The day after the Peninsula Shield Force deployed in Bahrain, King Hamad issued a royal order pursuant to which a three-month long state of national safety was declared in the country. The royal order marked the beginning of a period of unprecedented repression. Emboldened by the presence of the GCC troops, the Bahraini government clamped down hard on the opposition. There were reports of mass arrests, harassment, beating, and torture against demonstrators, medical personnel, and people in custody. Contrary to what happened in Egypt, where the military refused to crack down on demonstrators, Bahraini police and armed forces stood squarely on the side of the Al Khalifas.<sup>239</sup> Credible accounts estimate that 35 individuals died during the February-March unrest,

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<sup>238</sup> Karen DeYoung, "Top White House Aide Delivers Obama Letter to Saudi King," *The Washington Post*, April 12, 2011, [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-04-12/world/35230218\\_1\\_saudis-bahrain-obama-letter](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-04-12/world/35230218_1_saudis-bahrain-obama-letter); Echague, *The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings*; Kinninmont Jane, Chatham House Interview; Ulrichsen Kristian Coates, Chatham House Interview; Daniel Byman, "After the Hope of the Arab Spring, the Chill of an Arab Winter," *The Washington Post*, December 2, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/after-the-hope-of-the-arab-spring-the-chill-of-an-arab-winter/2011/11/28/gIQABGqHIO\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/after-the-hope-of-the-arab-spring-the-chill-of-an-arab-winter/2011/11/28/gIQABGqHIO_story.html).

<sup>239</sup> In Bahrain the police and the armed forces are run by Sunni Bahrainis and their rank and file are overwhelmingly manned by foreigners, mostly Sunni Muslims coming from countries such as Iraq, Yemen, Jordan, Pakistan, and

five of them while in detention. The unwavering support that Bahraini state security institutions showed for the royal family, along with the deployment of GCC troops, undoubtedly reduced the ability of the opposition to exert enough pressure on the Al Khalifas to compel the government to offer meaningful concessions.<sup>240</sup>

On June 1, the Bahraini king announced the end of the state of national safety and invited what was left of the anti-government opposition to join a wide-ranging national dialogue on political and economic reform. In a further move to ease domestic tensions and divert international criticism, the king also established the Bahraini Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI). The BICI was composed of five senior international lawyers and its primary task was “to investigate and report on the events occurring in Bahrain in February/March 2011, and any subsequent consequences arising out of the aforementioned events, and to make such recommendations as it may deem appropriate.” Despite the king’s conciliatory moves, low-intensity clashes between mostly-Shiite protesters and state security forces continued almost daily. As for the renewed national dialogue, major opposition groups, like Al Wefaq, soon withdrew from the negotiations accusing the government of not being serious about reforms.<sup>241</sup>

Although increasingly concerned by unrest in Bahrain (on March 16, Secretary Clinton described the situation as “alarming”) the Obama administration did not substantially changed its position toward the popular uprising. The US administration, in fact, continued to work assiduously to advance a political solution to the crisis. Accordingly, the Department of Defense encouraged the government and the opposition in Bahrain to “sit down together and talk about the long-term relationship between the government and the Shiite majority.” The Department of State welcomed the announcement of comprehensive and unconditional talks in June as a “positive step” and similarly described the decision to form the BICI in July as a “step in the right direction”.

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elsewhere. Given their foreign nature and religious affiliation, the loyalty of the police and the military lies with Bahrain’s Sunni royal family who pays their salaries and not with the Bahraini, mainly Shiite, citizenry. See for example: Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*.

<sup>240</sup> BBC, “Bahrain King Declares State of Emergency After Protests,” March 15, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12745608>; James Traub, “Friend Request,” *Foreign Policy*, May 27, 2011, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/05/27/friend\\_request](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/05/27/friend_request); Al Jazeera, “Bahrain Hospitals ‘Paralysed’ by Unrest,” April 7, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/04/20114781638439583.html>; CNN, “U.S. Condemns Arrest of Opposition Figures in Bahrain,” March 19, 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/03/18/bahrain.protests/?hpt=T2>; Kinninmont, *Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse*, 10.

<sup>241</sup> Joby Warrick, “Bahrain Ends State of Emergency, Promises Talks on Political Reform,” *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/bahrain-ends-state-of-emergency-promises-talks-on-political-reform/2011/05/31/AGv9OIFH\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/bahrain-ends-state-of-emergency-promises-talks-on-political-reform/2011/05/31/AGv9OIFH_story.html); Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, “Royal Order No. 28 of 2011,” July 1, 2011, <http://bna.bh/portal/en/news/462963>; The Associated Press, “Shiite Party in Bahrain Leaves Talks With Rulers,” *The New York Times*, July 17, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/18/world/middleeast/18bahrain.html?ref=bahrain&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/18/world/middleeast/18bahrain.html?ref=bahrain&_r=1&); Human Rights Watch, *Bahrain’s Human Rights Crisis*, July 5, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/07/05/bahrain-human-rights-crisis>.

Throughout the uprising, any US criticism of the Al Khalifas' crackdown on the opposition was generally balanced by statements reaffirming the soundness and importance of the US-Bahraini bilateral relationship. Hence, President Obama's 19 May remarks on the Middle East and North Africa:

*"Bahrain is a longstanding partner, and we are committed to its security [...] Nevertheless, we have insisted both publicly and privately that mass arrests and brute force are at odds with the universal rights of Bahrain's citizens [...] and such steps will not make legitimate calls for reform go away. The only way forward is for the government and opposition to engage in a dialogue, and you can't have a real dialogue when parts of the peaceful opposition are in jail. The government must create the conditions for dialogue, and the opposition must participate to forge a just future for all Bahrainis."*<sup>242</sup>

The importance of US strategic interests in Bahrain added to Saudi Arabia's expressed opposition to any "revolutionary" change in the country to make the Obama administration extremely wary about coupling its public criticism with any action that would put tangible pressure on the Al Khalifas to reform. A concrete initiative to exercise such a pressure was instead pursued by the US Congress. In October 2011, both houses of the Congress passed a joint resolution that put on hold a planned \$53 million worth US arms sale to Bahrain. In a wording clearly reminiscent of the Leahy amendments,<sup>243</sup> the October resolution stated that,

*"providing military equipment and provisions for upgrades to a government that commits human rights violations and that has undertaken insufficient measures to seek reform and accountability is at odds with United States foreign policy goals of promoting democracy, human rights, accountability, and stability."*<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Hillary Clinton, "Interview With Kim Ghattas of BBC" (US Department of State, March 16, 2011), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/03/158444.htm>; Robert Gates, "Media Availability with Secretary Gates from Cairo, Egypt 23/03/2011" (US Department of Defense, March 23, 2011), <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4795>; Mark C. Toner, "Daily Press Briefing 31/05/2011" (US Department of State, May 31, 2011), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2011/05/164682.htm>; Mark C. Toner, "Daily Press Briefing 29/06/2011" (US Department of State, June 29, 2011), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2011/06/167310.htm>; Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa," May 19, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

<sup>243</sup> The Leahy amendments to the Foreign Assistance Act 1961 and to the DOD annual Appropriations Act prohibit the US State and Defense departments to provide military assistance to foreign military units that violate human rights with impunity. See: Nina Serafino et al., "Leahy Law" *Human Rights Provisions and Security Assistance: Issue Overview* (Congressional Research Service, January 29, 2014), <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R43361.pdf>.

<sup>244</sup> US Congress, "House Joint Resolution 80," October 6, 2011, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-112hjres80ih/pdf/BILLS-112hjres80ih.pdf>.

The US Congress eventually took the decision that the Obama administration had long been reluctant to take: to hold the Bahraini government accountable for its continued repressive response to a mostly peaceful popular mobilization. However, the US administration was very invested in the bilateral relationship with Bahrain and took successive actions that significantly limited the effect of the congressional resolution. In early 2012, the State Department indicated that part of the arms sale was in fact proceeding, using a clause that allowed the administration to sell military equipment under \$1 million without congressional approval. The State Department noted that it intended “to release some previously notified equipment needed for Bahrain’s external defense and support of Fifth Fleet operations.” US officials also emphasized that such a sale included spare parts and maintenance of equipment but no crowd-control items that could be used against protesters. The Obama administration justified the partial resumption of US arms sales by saying that the Bahraini government had carried out “some important initial steps” in implementing the recommendations made by the BICI and that US security assistance was used to “reinforce reforms in Bahrain.” Interviews with Bahraini officers performed in February 2012 by the think tank Carnegie Endowment for International Peace confirmed the absence of any significant disruption in US-Bahraini military relations. Conversely, Bahraini officers noted that the US International Military Education and Training, Foreign Military Financing, and Foreign Military Sales programs were continuing unhindered. Later in May, the Obama administration announced its decision to “release additional items and services for the Bahraini Defense Forces, Bahrain’s Coast Guard, and Bahrain’s National Guard” with the specific purpose “to help Bahrain maintain its external defense capabilities.” The existing halt in the sale of military items that could have been used for crowd-control was instead maintained. After a short-lived pause US-Bahraini military cooperation seemed to be back to “business as usual”.<sup>245</sup>

A senior US administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity, explained: “we have made this decision [to restart military assistance to Bahrain] on national security grounds. We have made this decision mindful of the fact that there remain a number of serious unresolved human rights issues in Bahrain which we expect the government of Bahrain to address.” In the eyes of the Obama administration, the need to maintain its strategic partnership with the Al Khalifas outweighed ideal considerations about promoting democratic and economic reforms in the country. Military cooperation between the United States and Bahrain, especially US access to Bahrain’s naval facilities, was critical to the pursuit of US strategic interests in the region and US military assistance

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<sup>245</sup> US Department of State, “Bahrain Security Assistance 27/01/2012,” January 27, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/01/182695.htm>; Wehrey, *The Precarious Ally: Bahrain’s Impasse and US Policy*; Kenneth Katzman, *Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy* 12/02/2013 (Congressional Research Service, February 12, 2013), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/95-1013.pdf>.

was an essential component of such a cooperation. As repeatedly noted by administration officials, a prolonged disruption of US military assistance would have not only decreased Bahrain's external defense capabilities but also impaired the activities of US military assets in the archipelago and the interoperability between the armed forces of the two countries. As a consequence, the United States would have been weakened in its regional effort to secure access to Persian Gulf energy resources, to contain Iranian aspirations, and to conduct counterterrorism and anti-piracy operations. Maintaining friendly and collaborative relations with Bahraini leaders was critical to secure such US strategic interests. Aware of this, the Obama administration avoided a confrontational stance toward the rulers of Bahrain and instead adopted a policy of moderate encouragement toward national reconciliation and reform.<sup>246</sup>

Along with serious concerns about protecting US strategic interests in the region, there were a number of additional reasons that limited the ability of the Obama administration to determine the outcome of the Bahraini uprising.

To begin with, there was the specter of Iranian involvement. Throughout the uprising, both the Bahraini and the Saudi royal families accused Bahraini protesters of being agents of the government in Tehran on numerous occasions. The Obama administration was also seriously concerned about Iran's ambitions toward the Gulf. However, with regard to the specific issue of the Bahraini uprising, US officials did not share their Gulf allies' assessment that Tehran was the hidden hand behind the unrest. In September 2011, speaking before the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Ambassador-designate to the Kingdom of Bahrain Thomas Krajewski stressed that, although "concerned" about the possibility of Iran exploiting the ongoing unrest in Bahrain, the US administration "saw no evidence of Iranian instigation." In fact, as noted in a 2008 US diplomatic cable, the United States had found no intelligence of Iranian economic or military support to the Bahraini opposition since at least the mid-1990s. The US assessment of Iran's involvement in the Bahraini uprising was later corroborated by the findings of the BICI. In its November 2011 report, the Commission concluded that no hard evidence was available to "establish a discernible link between specific incidents that occurred in Bahrain during February and March 2011 and the Islamic Republic of Iran." Diverging opinions on Iranian meddling notwithstanding, Bahraini and Saudi concerns meant that the United States interpreted what occurred in the tiny Gulf archipelago in light of the US strategic partnerships with the two royal families. Hence, the Obama

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<sup>246</sup> US Department of State, "Senior Administration Officials on Bahrain," May 11, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/05/189810.htm>; Indyk, Lieberthal, and O'Hanlon, *Bending History: Barack Obama's Foreign Policy*.

administration was reluctant to take concrete steps in support of the Bahraini pro-democracy opposition that would jeopardize its critical relationships with leaders in Manama and Riyadh.<sup>247</sup>

US access to Bahrain naval facilities was another factor behind US hesitancy to act tough on the Al Khalifas. There had been a lot of talk about contingency plans to relocate US military assets in the case of a break in the US-Bahraini military partnership. Alternative locations were identified in the UAE and Qatar but there were both political and technical problems that made such a relocation difficult. First, US expanded military facilities may have not sat well with the sensitivity of the local Arab populations. Second, the selected alternative locations either inconveniently shared docking and other facilities with large commercial operations or did not provide large US warships with the ease of docking that Naval Support Activity-Bahrain does. US policymakers, including the ranking member of the senate armed forces committee, John McCain, publicly denied plans for the relocation of US military assets explaining that the United States had “too much invested” in Bahrain to consider the idea of moving its assets elsewhere. In fact, the United States is currently implementing a \$580 million military construction program in Bahrain. A construction program that began in May 2010 and it is expected to be completed by 2015. The decision to relocate US military assets from Bahrain, after having invested significant amounts of taxpayers’ money there, would been hard to explain to a budget-wary US public opinion.<sup>248</sup>

A third reason for US reduced leverage on Bahrain’s domestic politics was mounting anti-Americanism. The Obama administration’s policy of half-hearted support for the uprising had in fact the double effect of disappointing people both in the royal family and in the opposition. On one side, hardliners within the Al Khalifas deeply resented US public criticism of their domestic response to the uprising and became suspicious of the US real commitment to the bilateral relationship. On the other side, demonstrators and human rights activists accused the Obama administration of failing to follow its rhetorical backing of democracy with actual policies in

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<sup>247</sup> Echague, *The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings*; Doran and Shaikh, “Bahrain: Island of Troubles”; US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, “Nomination Hearing 21/09/2011,” September 21, 2011, <http://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/2011/09/21/nomination>; US Embassy in Bahrain, “US Embassy Cables: Bahrain’s Relations with Iran” (The Guardian, August 2008), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/164906>; Bassiouni, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, 387.

<sup>248</sup> Richard McDaniel, “No ‘Plan B’: U.S. Strategic Access in the Middle East and the Question of Bahrain” (Brookings Institution, June 24, 2013), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2013/06/24-us-strategic-access-middle-east-bahrain-mcdaniel>; Ulrichsen Kristian Coates, Chatham House Interview; The Associated Press, “Sen. McCain: Us Committed to Naval Hub in Bahrain,” *Yahoo!News*, December 9, 2012, <http://news.yahoo.com/sen-mccain-us-committed-naval-hub-bahrain-084307410.html>; Kenneth Katzman, *Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy 06/01/2014* (Congressional Research Service, January 6, 2014), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/95-1013.pdf>.

support of the Bahraini uprising. Increased anti-Americanism damaged US standing in Bahrain and made the effort of the United States to broker a political solution to the crisis even harder.<sup>249</sup>

### **Continuity or Change**

Conflicting national interests were at play when the United States had to frame its response to the 2011 uprising in Bahrain. The Obama administration could have advanced the longstanding US ideal interest of promoting democracy and freedom in the Greater Middle East by actively backing the Bahraini opposition's demands for political and economic reforms. Alternatively, the US administration could have sided with the Bahraini government mindful of the fact that Bahraini rulers' military cooperation was essential to the pursuit of US strategic interests. Such strategic interests in Bahrain included US unhindered access to the region's energy supplies, the containment of Iran's nuclear program and Iranian perceived expansionist ambitions toward the Gulf, and US regional policies to counter terrorism and piracy.

Throughout the uprising the Obama administration was consistent in supporting national dialogue and reconciliation between the Bahraini government and the opposition. Moreover, the White House, the State Department, and the Defense Department spoke with a single voice when they cautiously condemned the use of force against peaceful demonstrators, opposed the GCC military intervention, and voiced disappointment about the slow pace of reforms in the country. However, the US administration did not match its mild rhetorical criticism with any meaningful action or consequence. On the contrary, US officials circumvented the US Congress's October 2011 joint resolution that was aimed at holding the Bahraini government accountable for documented violence and repeated human rights violations. Moreover, the Obama administration also refused to join international efforts aimed at exerting even moderate pressure on the Al Khalifas to reform. For example, in June 2012, the UN Human Rights Council issued a statement conveying its "concern over the human rights situation in Bahrain, both the violations that took place in February and March 2011 as well as the related ongoing ones." While twenty-eight countries signed the UN document, the United States did not support the initiative. Finally, despite two years of continuous unrest and a death toll that, by the end of 2012, had reached a total of 85 uprising-related casualties,

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<sup>249</sup> Neumann, "Bahrain: A Very Complicated Little Island"; Kinninmont Jane, Chatham House Interview; Zainab Al Khawaja, "Bahrain, a Brutal Ally," *The New York Times*, December 25, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/26/opinion/bahrain-a-brutal-ally.html?ref=bahrain&\\_r=2&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/26/opinion/bahrain-a-brutal-ally.html?ref=bahrain&_r=2&).



the US administration did not impose, or even publicly threaten to impose, any sanctions against the Bahraini government or individual Bahraini officials.<sup>250</sup>

The US concern about maintaining its strategic cooperation with the Al Khalifas, and their potent patrons in Saudi Arabia, outweighed the US ideal goal of meaningfully supporting political and economic reforms. The US response to the Bahraini uprising was a manifest example of strategic interests trumping ideal interests. In our analysis of the 2011-12 events in Bahrain we could not detect any evidence of the “new beginning” in the US foreign policy toward the Muslim world that President Obama envisioned in his 2009 Cairo Speech.

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<sup>250</sup> UN Human Rights Council, “Joint Statement on the Human Rights Situation in Bahrain,” June 28, 2012, [http://www.eda.admin.ch/etc/medialib/downloads/edazen/topics/intorg/un/redeun/drho.Par.0185.File.tmp/Debat\\_general-Declaration\\_conjointe\\_sur\\_la\\_situation\\_des\\_droits\\_de\\_l\\_homme\\_a\\_Bahrein\\_en.pdf](http://www.eda.admin.ch/etc/medialib/downloads/edazen/topics/intorg/un/redeun/drho.Par.0185.File.tmp/Debat_general-Declaration_conjointe_sur_la_situation_des_droits_de_l_homme_a_Bahrein_en.pdf).

## Yemen: It's Counterterrorism, Stupid!

### US-Yemeni Relations prior to 2011

In 2011, the Republic of Yemen was the poorest state in the Arab world and one of the most destitute countries on earth. It ranked 154<sup>th</sup> out of 187 on the United Nations Human Development Index.<sup>251</sup> Yemen faced persistent problems including a weak central government, a shrinking economy highly dependent on declining oil resources (that roughly accounted for 25% of GDP and 70% of government revenue), water scarcity, poverty, unemployment, armed population, and a deteriorating security situation. Furthermore, in the early twenty-first century the authority of the central government in the capital Sanaa had been repeatedly challenged: between 2004 and 2010 an insurgent movement, the Houthis, waged an armed rebellion in the north;<sup>252</sup> in 2007 civil unrest reemerged in the south when disaffected southerners, led by the Hirak, renewed calls for secession;<sup>253</sup> and finally, toward the end of the decade, Islamist extremist groups, the most active of which was Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), had established safe havens across the country. According to some estimates, almost two-thirds of Yemen's territory was outside central government's control before the Arab Awakening reached the country.<sup>254</sup>

In Yemen, persistent instability, continued conflict, and the risk of central authority collapse represented serious threats to the US national interest in the region. To begin with, Yemen shares a long border with Saudi Arabia. With an average production of more than 11,000 barrels per day the Saudi Kingdom is the world's largest oil producer and exporter. Saudi Arabia is also a major pillar of the United States' alliance system in the Greater Middle East and ostensibly the United States' primary Gulf partner in the US policy of containment toward Iran. Therefore, disorder and unrest in

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<sup>251</sup> The UNHDI is used by the United Nations to describe the economic and social development of a country. It combines a number of indicators such as life expectancy, educational attainments, and income.

<sup>252</sup> In 2010, the Houthis and the Yemeni government agreed to a ceasefire that was still holding when the Yemeni uprising began in early 2011.

<sup>253</sup> Before the 1990 unification the Republic of Yemen was divided into the Yemen Arab Republic, also known as North Yemen, and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, also known as South Yemen. Since South Yemen and North Yemen merged in a single-state entity the South has harbored secessionist aspirations. Such aspirations sparked a violent civil war in 1994. Although military forces loyal to the Yemeni central government eventually won the war, southerners' grievances did not disappear.

<sup>254</sup> United Nations Development Programme, *Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All*, Human Development Report (New York, November 2, 2011), [http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/corporate/HDR/2011%20Global%20HDI/English/HDR\\_2011\\_EN\\_Complete.pdf](http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/corporate/HDR/2011%20Global%20HDI/English/HDR_2011_EN_Complete.pdf); Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook"; Albert H. Hourani, Philip S. Khoury, and Mary C. Wilson, *The Modern Middle East: A Reader* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009); Ibrahim Sharqieh, "Yemen: The Search for Stability and Development," in *The Arab Awakening* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011).

Yemen spilling over into Saudi Arabia would have the potential to threaten both the US strategic interest of securing safe access to Persian Gulf energy resources and the US strategic interest of containing Iranian influence. A recent example of such a negative spillover effect took place in 2009 when fighting in northern Yemen extended to Saudi Arabia after reported infiltrations into Saudi territory by Houthi insurgents spurred Saudi troops to carry out cross-border military operations into Yemen.<sup>255</sup>

In addition, Yemen flanks the Bab el-Mandeb strait. The Bab el-Mandeb is a chokepoint between the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, and a strategic link between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea that connects the markets of Asia, Europe, and North America. In 2011, an estimated 3.4 million barrels of oil per day flowed through the strait. A prolonged closure of the Bab el-Mandeb deriving from state breakdown in Yemen would prevent oil tankers from the Persian Gulf, but also other types of vessels, to access the Suez Canal and would divert them around the southern tip of Africa, increasing both costs and transit time. Again, the US strategic interest of having unhindered access to the rich energy resources of the Persian Gulf would be significantly compromised.<sup>256</sup>

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States, Yemen also became paramount for the US strategic interest of countering terrorism. As part of the US Global War on Terror, the United States started a program of military assistance and training to the Yemeni armed forces. The program included the provision of technical assistance, equipment, and training to the Yemeni Coast Guard to help patrol the strategic Bab el-Mandeb strait and to the Yemeni Anti-Terrorism Units to hunt down terrorist suspects. US officials were especially concerned about the possibility of Islamist extremist groups based in Yemen to organize and stage attacks against the US homeland and/or US facilities and personnel in the country. AQAP, the local branch of Al Qaeda, proved to be a particularly challenging adversary. In 2008, AQAP militants attacked the entrance of the US embassy in Sanaa, leading to the death of 17 people. In 2009, a Nigerian AQAP suspect tried to set off a bomb concealed in his underwear on a Detroit-bound flight. Finally, in 2010, AQAP operatives managed to ship two explosive devices destined to Chicago on commercial cargo planes.

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<sup>255</sup> US Energy Information Administration, "Country Analysis Brief: Saudi Arabia," accessed February 10, 2013, [http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/Saudi\\_Arabia/saudi\\_arabia.pdf](http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/Saudi_Arabia/saudi_arabia.pdf); US House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, "Shifting Sands: Political Transitions in the Middle East, Part 1," April 13, 2011, <http://archives.republicans.foreignaffairs.house.gov/112/65796.pdf>.

<sup>256</sup> US Energy Information Administration, *World Oil Transit Chokepoints*, August 22, 2012, [http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/World\\_Oil\\_Transit\\_Chokepoints/wotc.pdf](http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/World_Oil_Transit_Chokepoints/wotc.pdf); US House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, "Shifting Sands: Political Transitions in the Middle East, Part 1"; Jeremy Sharp, *Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations 01/11/2012* (Congressional Research Service, November 1, 2012), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL34170.pdf>.

Although these last two attack attempts were not successful, they nevertheless highlighted the tangible nature of the threat represented by extremist groups in Yemen. In early 2011, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates publicly conveyed such a US concern when he stated: “We consider Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which is largely located in Yemen, to be perhaps the most dangerous of all the franchises of Al Qaeda right now.”<sup>257</sup>

In the wake of the failed 2009 underwear terrorist attack, the Obama administration ordered a major review of US policy toward Yemen. Accordingly, the US National Security Council produced a strategic plan that focused on three main points: combating AQAP in the short term, increasing development assistance in the long term, and marshaling international support for stabilization policies. As for US counterterrorism efforts, the Obama administration began to increasingly rely on drone strikes as part of a US covert program to target and kill Al Qaeda commanders in Yemen. In December 2010, US Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism John Brennan stated that occasional tensions with the Yemeni government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh<sup>258</sup> were “healthy” and “the hallmark of true friendship: not telling the other what they want to hear but telling the other what they need to hear.” Less than a month later, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a surprise visit to Yemen. It was the first of such a visit by a US secretary of state since 1990. During her meeting with President Saleh, Secretary Clinton announced the United States’ commitment to “a broad relationship” with Yemen that included fighting against extremist groups but went “beyond counterterrorism.” Clinton also welcomed the Yemeni government’s decision to undertake “a number of reforms” in the economic, social, and political sectors and she pledged US assistance for “an inclusive political process that will, in turn, support a unified, prosperous, stable, democratic Yemen.”<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Jeremy Sharp, *Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations 13/01/2010* (Congressional Research Service, January 13, 2010), <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/137261.pdf>; Council on Foreign Relations, *Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula*, accessed August 8, 2014, <http://www.cfr.org/yemen/al-qaeda-arabian-peninsula-aqap/p9369>; Robert Gates, “Media Availability with Secretary Gates from Moscow, Russia” (US Department of Defense, March 22, 2011), <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4791>.

<sup>258</sup> Ali Abdullah Saleh had held the office of the presidency since the creation of the unified Republic of Yemen in 1990. Prior to this, Saleh had been president of the northern Yemen Republic since 1978.

<sup>259</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, Robert Shelala II, and Omar Mohamed, *Yemen and U.S. Security (Draft)* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 8, 2013), [https://csis.org/files/publication/130808\\_yemen\\_burkechair\\_updated.pdf](https://csis.org/files/publication/130808_yemen_burkechair_updated.pdf); Bill Roggio and Bob Barry, “Charting the Data for US Air Strikes in Yemen, 2002 - 2014,” *The Long War Journal*, accessed August 8, 2014, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/multimedia/Yemen/code/Yemen-strike.php>; John Brennan, “John Brennan on US Policy Toward Yemen” (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 17, 2010), <http://carnegieendowment.org/2010/12/17/john-brennan-on-u.s.-policy-toward-yemen/2sd>; Hillary Clinton, “Remarks With Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh After Their Meeting” (US Department of State, January 11, 2011), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/01/154243.htm>; Mark Landler, “Clinton Addresses Terrorism and Politics in Yemen,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/12/world/middleeast/12diplo.html?ref=yemen>.

Brennan and Clinton's public remarks, however, were misleading. Diplomatic cables leaked to the general public proved, in fact, that the relationship between the United States and President Saleh was much more controversial than one could otherwise infer from the previous US official statements. In particular, Saleh's lack of attention, and sometimes even direct obstruction, to US counterterrorism operations in Yemen and US concerns about democratic shortcomings and widespread corruption in the country had prevented the bilateral relationship to grow warmer. In some of these leaked cables, US officials expressed profound skepticism about President Saleh's commitment to fighting Yemen-based extremist groups. According to a May 2009 cable, the United States received credible intelligence saying that "The ROYG [Republic Of Yemen Government] offered to cease attacks on AQAP if the organization halted attacks against ROYG elements." The May cable continued by suggesting that "Saleh's most pressing concern remains preserving his own power rather than eradicating Yemen's thriving extremist community." Similarly, in a December 2009 cable, the US ambassador to Yemen complained that US-trained Anti-Terrorist Units had "been derailed from [their] principal mission: to combat AQAP" and used to fight the Houthi insurgency in the north. US skepticism was clearly reciprocated. During private conversations President Saleh reportedly described the Americans as "hot-blooded and hasty when [they] need us," but "cold-blooded and British when we need [them]." In light of the above, US Assistant to the President John Brennan's description of the US-Yemeni relationship as one of "true friendship", seems to be highly inaccurate. Over time, the bilateral relationship between leaders in Washington and Sanaa displayed significant elements of cooperation, especially on the issue of counterterrorism, but it never reached anything close to true friendship.<sup>260</sup>

### **The Yemeni Uprising and US Response**

Not long after Secretary Clinton's surprise visit to Yemen, popular protests broke out in the country. On January 16, hundreds of Yemeni took to the streets in Sanaa to express solidarity with the protesters in Tunisia who had succeeded in ousting Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Slogans of support for the Tunisian uprising soon turned into expressions of domestic grievances

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<sup>260</sup> Hughes Arthur, Director-General of the Egypt-Israel Multinational Force and Observers (1998-2004) Interview, interview by Eugenio Lilli, January 15, 2013; US Department of State, "US Diplomatic Cable 09 STATE45504," May 5, 2009, <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/05/09STATE45504.html>; Stephen Seche, "US Diplomatic Cable: Yemen's Counter Terrorism Unit Stretched Thin by War Against Houthis," December 17, 2009, [http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09SANAA2230\\_a.html](http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09SANAA2230_a.html); US Embassy in Sanaa, "US Diplomatic Cable: Ambassador Benjamin Discusses Ct Assistance, Airport Security with Saleh," February 3, 2010, [http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10SANAA221\\_a.html](http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10SANAA221_a.html); Robert Booth and Ian Black, "Yemeni President 'Bizarre and Petulant', Wikileaks Cables Claim," *The Guardian*, December 3, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/03/yemeni-president-bizarre-petulant-wikileaks>.

and demands for domestic reform. Yemeni demonstrators protested against the widespread corruption of the political system, the lack of democracy, President Saleh-sponsored constitutional amendments to extend his stay in power, and the general dire economic and social conditions of the country. Sporadic street protests continued in the following days and spread outside of the capital Sanaa. The youth, especially university students, and human rights activists were the initiators of the Yemeni uprising. They were soon to be joined in their demonstrations by members of the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), an eclectic coalition of five political parties<sup>261</sup> that represented the Yemeni traditional opposition in parliament to President Saleh's dominant General People's Congress Party (GPCP).<sup>262</sup>

The Obama administration was genuinely concerned about protests in Yemen getting out of control. US officials were particularly worried that anti-government demonstrations would distract President Saleh from his counterterrorism operations against AQAP. After the outbreak of the uprising, the US State Department said that while it supported "the right of the Yemeni people to express themselves and assemble freely," it was also closely monitoring the security situation in the country. On February 2, US President Obama during a reportedly cordial call with his Yemeni counterpart reminded Saleh that it was "imperative that Yemen take forceful action against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to protect innocent lives in Yemen as well as abroad."<sup>263</sup>

An initially peaceful uprising eventually took a violent turn in mid-February. On February 18, five people were killed in clashes between protesters and state security forces in the southern cities of Taiz and Aden. Five days later, pro-government supporters opened fire against demonstrators

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<sup>261</sup> The JMP included: the Islah (Reform) Party, the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), the Nasserist Popular Unionist Party (NPUP), the al-Haq Party, and the Union of Popular Forces (UPF). Islah had an Islamist agenda. It was the most powerful member of the coalition and the only one with a genuine national appeal. The YSP ranked second in terms of importance. It used to rule in South Yemen before unification and it still retained some influence there. Finally, the NPUP, al-Haq, and the UPF had little to no popular base.

<sup>262</sup> International Crisis Group, *Popular Protest in North African and the Middle East (ii): Yemen Between Reform and Revolution* (International Crisis Group, March 10, 2011), [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Yemen/102%20Popular%20Protest%20in%20North%20Africa%20and%20the%20Middle%20East%20II\\_%20Yemen%20between%20Reform%20and%20Revolution.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Yemen/102%20Popular%20Protest%20in%20North%20Africa%20and%20the%20Middle%20East%20II_%20Yemen%20between%20Reform%20and%20Revolution.pdf); Mohammed Jamjoom, "Yemenis Protest in Support of Tunisians," *CNN*, January 17, 2011, [http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/01/16/yemen.protest/index.html?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/01/16/yemen.protest/index.html?_s=PM:WORLD); Anthony Shadid, Nada Bakri, and Kareem Fahim, "Waves of Unrest Spread to Yemen, Shaking a Region," *The New York Times*, January 27, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/28/world/middleeast/28unrest.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1&ref=yemen](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/28/world/middleeast/28unrest.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&ref=yemen); Al Jazeera, "Who's Who in Yemen's Opposition?," February 28, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/yemen/2011/02/2011228141453986337.html>; Michaelle L. Browsers, "Yemen's Joint Meeting Parties: Origins and Architects," in *Political Ideology in the Arab World* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>263</sup> Philip Crowley, "Daily Press Briefing 27/01/2011" (US Department of State, January 27, 2011), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2011/01/155402.htm#YEMEN>; The White House, "Readout of President's Call with President Saleh of Yemen 03/02/2011," February 3, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/03/readout-presidents-call-president-saleh-yemen>.

camping outside Sanaa University killing two and wounding 23. The decision of the Yemeni government to resort to violent means to stop popular protests had the effect of unifying the opposition, radicalizing its demands (by then the removal of Saleh from the presidency topped the demonstrators' agenda), and leading to the resignation of members of parliament and ministers from Saleh's GPCP.<sup>264</sup>

The White House responded to the first uprising-related casualties in Yemen by condemning "the use of violence by governments against peaceful protesters" and urging state security forces "to show restraint in responding to peaceful protests, and to respect the rights of their people." Contrary to what happened in Egypt and Bahrain, the Obama administration coupled its public criticism with actual policies. In February, growing instability in the country and a serious concern that US-armed and US-trained counterterrorism units were used to quell mostly peaceful demonstrations convinced the US administration to suspend a previously-agreed security assistance package to Yemen. In particular, the US Defense Department halted its Section 1206 assistance to the Yemeni armed forces. Section 1206 includes funding for the equipment, supplies, and training of foreign national military forces engaged in counterterrorist operations.<sup>265</sup>

Perhaps in response to such a decision President Saleh seized the opportunity of a public speech at Sanaa University to harshly criticize the United States for being behind the Yemeni uprising. Directly addressing the US president, Saleh stated: "Mr. Obama, you are the president of the United States; you are not the president of the Arab world." A spokesperson for the US State Department replied through a message on the social network *Twitter* that read: "The protests in Yemen are not the product of external conspiracies. President Saleh knows better. His people deserve a better response." Despite the fact that, less than twenty-four hours after his public remarks, President

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<sup>264</sup> Al Jazeera, "Yemen Protesters Clash with Police," February 14, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/video/middleeast/2011/02/2011213235027318750.html>; BBC, "Yemen Protests: Five Killed at Anti-Government Rallies," February 19, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12507889>; Ahramonline.org.eg, "Yemeni Protesters Defiant After Deadly Attack," February 23, 2011, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/6284/World/Region/Yemeni-protesters-defiant-after-deadly-attack.aspx>; Laura Kasinof, "Opposition in Yemen Supports Protesters," *The New York Times*, February 28, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/01/world/middleeast/01yemen.html?ref=yemen>.

<sup>265</sup> The US Department of Defense announced it had resumed training programs and military aid, including Section 1206, to Yemen between spring and summer 2012. See: Jim Garamone, "U.S. Trainers, Military Cooperation Return to Yemen" (US Department of Defense, May 8, 2012), <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=116252>; Tony Capaccio, "Pentagon Resumes Arms Aid to Yemen for Counter-Terrorism," *Bloomberg*, July 18, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-07-18/pentagon-resumes-arms-aid-to-yemen-for-counter-terrorism.html>; Obama, "Statement by the President on Violence in Bahrain, Libya and Yemen 18/02/2011"; Keith Johnson, Adam Entous, and Margaret Coker, "U.S. Halted Record Aid Deal as Yemen Rose Up," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 8, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704101604576249204208045910.html>; Katherine Zimmerman, "Recipe for Failure: American Strategy toward Yemen and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," *Criticalthreats.org*, February 17, 2012, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/zimmerman-recipe-for-failure-american-strategy-february-17-2012>.

Saleh called US Assistant to the President Brennan “to convey his regret for misunderstandings”, the actions of the Obama administration and the reactions of the Yemeni government confirmed the distinctly tense nature of the relationship existing between the two leaderships in Washington and Sanaa.<sup>266</sup>

Violence escalated to unprecedented levels on March 18 when unidentified gunmen hidden on rooftops indiscriminately shot at demonstrators in Sanaa after Friday prayers. The ensuing violent confrontations between pro- and anti-government protesters led to 53 people dead and hundreds injured.<sup>267</sup> The March 18 clashes represented a turning point for the Yemeni uprising. First, a number of top Yemeni military commanders defected and pledged to deploy their troops to protect the demonstrators. Among them there was Maj. Gen. Ali Mohsen, the commander of the strong First Armored Division and arguably the second most powerful man in Yemen. Moreover, many members of Saleh’s GPCP, including scores of ambassadors, resigned from their posts and from the party. Finally, prominent religious and tribal Yemeni leaders, including influential Sheikh Sadeq al Ahmar, publicly threw their weight behind the uprising and appealed to the president to step down peacefully.<sup>268</sup>

President Saleh reacted to the mounting opposition by declaring a month-long state of emergency, effectively suspending the constitution, and by recalling loyalist troops to the capital to rescue his embattled regime. Political and military divisions within the regime reduced the central government’s already limited ability to control Yemen’s peripheral regions and provided Houthi rebels, southern secessionists, and Islamist extremist groups with wider freedom of action. In March

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<sup>266</sup> Al Jazeera, “Yemen Leader Blames Protests on US,” March 1, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/03/20113191141211328.html>; The White House, “Readout of John Brennan’s Call with President Salih 02/03/2011,” March 2, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/02/readout-john-brennan-s-call-president-salih>.

<sup>267</sup> Although the Yemeni government dismissed the opposition’s charge that the gunmen were plainclothes members of the security forces, the findings of a report by the UN high commissioner for human rights that investigated the events of March-May 2011 in Yemen held that “plain clothes individuals, named as baltaji/baltajiyah, engaged in activities alongside security forces to attack protesters with batons or firearms. When such individuals were seized by protesters, some allegedly carried documents linking them with security organs.” Human Rights Council, *Report of the High Commissioner on OHCHR’s Visit to Yemen*, September 13, 2011, 7, <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/YE/YemenAssessmentMissionReport.pdf>.

<sup>268</sup> Laura Kasinof and Robert F. Worth, “Dozens of Protesters Are Killed in Yemen,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/19/world/middleeast/19yemen.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1&ref=yemen](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/19/world/middleeast/19yemen.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&ref=yemen); Human Rights Council, *Report of the High Commissioner on OHCHR’s Visit to Yemen*; Karen DeYoung, “Yemen’s Leader Batters down the Hatches as Defections Mount,” *The Washington Post*, March 22, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/yemens-leader-batters-down-the-hatches/2011/03/21/ABWfMb9\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/yemens-leader-batters-down-the-hatches/2011/03/21/ABWfMb9_story.html); Al Jazeera, “Top Army Commanders Defect in Yemen,” March 21, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/03/2011320180579476.html>; International Crisis Group, *Yemen: Enduring Conflicts, Threatened Transition*, Middle East Report, July 3, 2012, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Yemen/125-yemen-enduring-conflicts-threatened-transition.pdf>.



alone, the Houthis had seized control of the northern Saada governorate while Islamist armed militants had taken over Jaar, a city located in the southeastern Abyan governorate.<sup>269</sup>

Throughout April and May 2011, Yemen witnessed an escalation of armed confrontations between loyalist and defected troops and between government forces and tribesmen affiliated to the Al Ahmar family. Such confrontations marked the transformation of a once peaceful youth-led uprising, demanding democratic reforms, into an armed struggle for power among competing elites. President Saleh, Maj. Gen. Ali Mohsen, and the Al Ahmars, indeed, represented the three major traditional power centers of Yemen's politics whose vast influence dated back at least to the early 1990s. Meanwhile, human rights activists and youth demonstrators continued to camp out in several Yemeni cities and to profess their adherence to non-violent forms of protest but the ongoing elites' power struggle seemed to have irremediably marginalized these groups and their demands.<sup>270</sup>

The Obama administration was deeply worried by the latest developments in Yemen. Important military and political defections, along with continuous mass protests, had significantly reduced Saleh's base of support and severely crippled his regime. Ongoing confrontations among armed groups had dangerously put the country on the path to a bloody civil war. The risk of an imminent collapse of Yemen's already weak state institutions suddenly seemed very real. US officials feared that the instability originating from state breakdown in Yemen would dangerously spread to the Arabian Peninsula and threaten the rule of local US allies, especially that of the Saudi royal family. As explained above, the cooperation of the Saudi rulers was pivotal for the United States in order to secure its access to the energy resources of the Persian Gulf. In addition, Saudi partnership was critical for the US policy of containment toward Iran since Riyadh represented the major regional counterweight to Teheran's influence. The United States was also concerned that the collapse of Yemen's central institutions would result in a state of lawlessness along the country's waterways, mainly through the Bab el-Mandeb strait, and therefore endanger the transit of commercial goods and oil in particular. On top of that, the Obama administration was extremely worried by the fact that Yemeni government troops were ordered to halt their operations against AQAP and pulled back to Sanaa to protect the president. This last development directly threatened the US counterterrorism

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<sup>269</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Yemen: Emergency Law Does Not Trump Basic Rights*, March 23, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/23/yemen-emergency-law-does-not-trump-basic-rights>; Laura Kasinof and David E. Sanger, "U.S. Shifts to Seek Removal of Yemen's Leader, an Ally," *The New York Times*, April 3, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/world/middleeast/04yemen.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1&ref=yemen](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/world/middleeast/04yemen.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&ref=yemen).

<sup>270</sup> International Crisis Group, *Yemen's Military-Security Reform: Seeds of New Conflict?*, Middle East Report, April 4, 2013, 7, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Yemen/139-yemens-military-security-reform-seeds-of-new-conflict.pdf>; Khaled Fattah, "Yemen: A Social Intifada In a Republic of Sheikhs," *Middle East Policy* XVIII, no. 3 (Fall 2011).

effort against the Yemeni branch of Al Qaeda, ostensibly the primary US strategic interest in the country.<sup>271</sup>

Similar concerns about the negative effects of continued instability for US strategic interests in Yemen were shared by officials within the White House, the Department of State, and the Department of Defense. Along with members of the executive, the situation in Yemen preoccupied also lawmakers in the US Congress. In several hearings on Yemen, congressmen repeatedly expressed their concerns about chaos spilling over to Yemen's neighbors and about Islamic extremists taking advantage of the protracted disorder. Such a general consensus on the sensitivity of the Yemeni issue translated into the United States speaking with a single voice.<sup>272</sup>

After the March 18 killings, President Obama “strongly condemn[ed] the violence” and “call[ed] on President Saleh to adhere to his public pledge to allow demonstrations to take place peacefully.” The US president also urged the Yemeni government, along with the opposition, “to participate in an open and transparent process that addresses the legitimate concerns of the Yemeni people”. Asked if it was time for President Saleh to step down, Secretary of Defense Gates declined to give a direct answer: “I don’t think it is my place to talk about internal affairs in Yemen.” However, Gates made clear that “instability and diversion of attention from dealing with AQAP is certainly my primary concern about the situation.” Similarly, the Department of State repeatedly evaded the question about President Saleh having lost the legitimacy to lead his country. A State spokesperson reaffirmed that what the United States wanted to see in Yemen was the government and the opposition “to demonstrate restraint and use dialogue to work for a peaceful resolution.” At this stage, the Obama administration denounced the ongoing violence in Yemen and advocated for political dialogue to find a peaceful solution to the crisis. Notably, US officials did not make any reference to the need for a power transition or hold President Saleh personally responsible for the civilian deaths.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Ulrichsen Kristian Coates, Chatham House Interview; Greenfield Danya, Atlantic Council Interview, interview by Eugenio Lilli, January 15, 2013; Sharp, *Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations 01/11/2012*; Johnson, Entous, and Coker, “U.S. Halted Record Aid Deal as Yemen Rose Up.”

<sup>272</sup> For some examples of the debates about Yemen in the US Congress see: US House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, “Shifting Sands: Political Transitions in the Middle East, Part 1”; US Senate Subcommittee on Near East and South and Central Asian Affairs, “U.S. Policy in Yemen,” July 19, 2011, <http://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/us-policy-in-yemen>.

<sup>273</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement by the President on Violence in Yemen 18/03/2011” (The White House, March 18, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/18/statement-president-violence-yemen>; Robert Gates, “Media Availability with Secretary Gates from Moscow, Russia” (US Department of Defense, March 22, 2011), <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4791>; Mark C. Toner, “Daily Press Briefing 22/03/2011” (US Department of State, March 22, 2011), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2011/03/158828.htm#YEMEN>.

US stance toward the Yemeni uprising changed in April and May amidst mounting violence and a rapidly deteriorating security situation. The White House reminded President Saleh “of his responsibility to ensure the safety and security of Yemenis who are exercising their universal right to engage in political expression,” and exhorted the Yemeni president “to engage in a constructive political dialogue” with the opposition “so that meaningful political change can take place in the near term in an orderly and peaceful manner.”<sup>274</sup>

The Department of Defense concurred:

*“Yemen is of major concern to us, has been for years because of the presence of Al Qaeda there and the threats that have emanated from there [...] Obviously, the situation right now is a [...] difficult one. The longer it festers, the more difficult it becomes. That is why this government has been urging a negotiated transition as quickly as possible.”*<sup>275</sup>

Finally, Secretary of State Clinton, in a slightly more determined tone, expressed her disappointment with President Saleh’s response “to the legitimate aspirations of the Yemeni people.” Clinton stressed that Saleh was “now the only party that refuses to match actions to words” and urged him “to immediately follow through on his repeated commitments to peacefully and orderly transfer power and ensure the legitimate will of the Yemeni people is addressed. The time for action is now.” The Obama administration continued to identify political dialogue between the government and the opposition as the best way to find a peaceful solution to the Yemeni crisis. However, in a marked shift from its previous position, the US administration publicly singled out President Saleh’s behavior as a major obstacle to peace. Although US officials refrained from explicitly demanding Saleh’s resignation, they increasingly began to refer to the need for “meaningful political change”, “a negotiated transition”, and a “transfer of power”.<sup>276</sup>

US growing frustration with President Saleh derived from the Yemeni President’s repeated broken pledges to sign a transition plan proposed by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in early April.<sup>277</sup> According to the GCC plan, Saleh would have transferred his powers to the vice-president, then a national unity government led by the opposition would have been formed, followed by the drafting

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<sup>274</sup> The White House, “Statement by the Press Secretary on Violence in Yemen 05/04/2011,” April 5, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/04/05/statement-press-secretary-violence-yemen>.

<sup>275</sup> Geoff Morrell, “DOD News Briefing with Geoff Morrell from the Pentagon” (US Department of Defense, April 5, 2011), <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4805>.

<sup>276</sup> Hillary Clinton, “Ongoing Situation in Yemen 22/05/2011” (US Department of State, May 22, 2011), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/05/164068.htm>.

<sup>277</sup> GCC leaders’ decision to advance a plan for a transition of power in Yemen was probably facilitated by the fresh memory of President Saleh supporting Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

and approval of a new constitution. In exchange for his peaceful resignation, President Saleh, and those who had served under him, would be granted immunity from prosecution. The Joint Meeting Parties agreed to the GCC plan whereas the extra-parliamentary opposition denounced it, especially the immunity clause that would have allowed Saleh and his inner circle not to be held responsible for the deaths of dozens of demonstrators. Although Saudi Arabia was without doubt the primary force behind the transition plan, the United States also played an important mediating role. In particular, US Ambassador to Yemen Gerald M. Feierstein had been constantly involved in private negotiations with both the government and the opposition since at least mid-March. Unlike the cases of Egypt and Bahrain, where visible differences emerged between Washington and Riyadh, US and Saudi strategies to address the Yemeni uprising converged toward common support for an orderly transition of power.<sup>278</sup>

It took the US administration five months of popular protests, and at least 174 documented deaths of demonstrators at the hand of Yemeni security forces, to eventually back, in unequivocal terms, the opposition's demand that President Saleh had to resign.<sup>279</sup> It was Secretary Clinton, on June 1, that publicly conveyed this last adjustment in the US policy toward the Yemeni uprising:

*“President Saleh was given a very good offer, that we strongly backed by the Gulf countries, and we cannot expect this conflict to end unless President Saleh and his government move out of the way to permit [...] the opposition and civil society to begin a transition to political and economic reform.”*<sup>280</sup>

Exactly two days after Clinton told Saleh to “move out of the way” a planted bomb exploded at the Sanaa presidential compound. The attack, that the government blamed on tribesmen loyal to the Al Ahmars, left the Yemeni President severely wounded. Saleh was first taken to a military hospital in the capital and then, the following day, transferred to Saudi Arabia to receive proper medical treatment. Vice-President Abd Rabbo Mansur Hadi temporarily assumed presidential powers. In addition, Saudi Arabia brokered a tenuous ceasefire between government troops and Al Ahmar tribal militias. These three latest developments raised hopes that the Yemeni crisis was getting

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<sup>278</sup> Laura Kasinof, “Gulf Nations Repeat Offer to Mediate Crisis in Yemen,” *The New York Times*, April 10, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/11/world/middleeast/11yemen.html?ref=yemen>; International Crisis Group, *Yemen: Enduring Conflicts, Threatened Transition*; Human Rights Council, *Report of the High Commissioner on OHCHR's Visit to Yemen*; Jeb Boone and Sudarsan Raghavan, “Yemen's President Agrees to Resign in Tentative Deal,” *The Washington Post*, April 23, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/yemens-president-saleh-agrees-to-step-down-in-return-for-immunity/2011/04/23/AFu59SWE\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/yemens-president-saleh-agrees-to-step-down-in-return-for-immunity/2011/04/23/AFu59SWE_story.html); Kinninmont Jane, Chatham House Interview.

<sup>279</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Yemen: Dozens of Civilians Killed in Southern Fighting*, July 9, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/07/09/yemen-dozens-civilians-killed-southern-fighting>.

<sup>280</sup> Hillary Clinton, “Remarks With Brazilian Foreign Minister Antonio de Aguiar Patriota After Their Meeting” (US Department of State, June 1, 2011), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/06/164738.htm>.

closer to a solution. Such hopes, however, were short-lived. During summer 2011, in fact, the Yemeni uprising grounded to a virtual standstill: political negotiations faltered, the security and economic conditions worsened, and violent clashes among rival factions became commonplace.<sup>281</sup>

In an unexpected move that caught both Yemeni and international observers off guard, President Saleh suddenly returned to Yemen on September 23. The weeks that followed were punctuated by the Yemeni president's repeated vague offers for dialogue and the opposition's firm demand that for any meaningful dialogue to start Saleh had first to resign. In October, amid continued violence, the UN Security Council (UNSC) unanimously passed Resolution 2014 that "demanded that all sides immediately reject violence, and called on them to commit to a peaceful transition of power based on proposals by the major regional organization of the Arabian Gulf." Notably, beyond a strong condemnation for "human rights violations by authorities, and abuses by other actors," UNSC Resolution 2014 did not contain any reference to sanctions against those responsible for such despicable actions.<sup>282</sup>

During this time, the United States consistently undertook a broad diplomatic effort to put an end to instability in Yemen. The Obama administration used its embassy in Sanaa to hold direct talks with the government and the opposition, repeatedly supported the GCC plan for an orderly transition of power, and co-sponsored UN Security Council Resolution 2014. Along with this diplomatic effort, the US administration also decided to step up its counterterrorism operations in the country. In fact, soon after the outbreak of the uprising, Yemeni government troops had mostly abandoned their fight against AQAP and had been pulled back to the capital to defend the regime. As a consequence, Islamist extremist groups seized the opportunity to consolidate their power in the south-east of Yemen where they reportedly took control of the cities of Jaar and Zinjibar. In order to stop AQAP, and other likeminded groups, from making further advances the Obama administration came to the conclusion that the United States had to resume its airstrikes and drone campaign. US strikes had been suspended a year before following an incident in May 2010 when a Yemeni deputy

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<sup>281</sup> Amena Bakr, "Yemen's Saleh Injured by Planted Bomb - Source," *Reuters*, June 26, 2011, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/06/26/uk-yemen-president-idUKTRE75P0NO20110626>; Al Jazeera, "Yemen President Speaks After Attack," June 4, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/06/201163125916642890.html>; Ernesto Londono and Sudarsan Raghavan, "Yemeni Crowds Celebrate After President Transfers Power, Flies to Saudi Arabia," *The Washington Post*, June 4, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/speculation-grows-on-yemeni-presidents-condition/2011/06/04/AGpN9xIH\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/speculation-grows-on-yemeni-presidents-condition/2011/06/04/AGpN9xIH_story.html); Human Rights Watch, *Yemen: Dozens of Civilians Killed in Southern Fighting*.

<sup>282</sup> Laura Kasinof and Robert F. Worth, "After Four Months, Saleh Is Back in Yemen," *The New York Times*, September 23, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/24/world/middleeast/yemens-president-ali-abdullah-saleh-abruptly-returns-from-saudi-arabia.html?pagewanted=1&ref=yemen>; UN Security Council, "Security Council Condemns Human Rights Violations by Yemeni Authorities, Abuses by 'Other Actors', after Months of Political Strife," October 21, 2011, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sc10418.doc.htm>.

governor, who was on a mission to mediate the surrender of some Islamist extremists, was accidentally killed by an airstrike originally intended to target Al Qaeda operatives. In the meantime, US officials reached out to the Yemeni opposition to make the case for continued US counterterrorism operations in the event of President Saleh's removal from power. According to credible accounts, the opposition provided strong assurances that counterterrorism cooperation between the United States and Yemen would go on regardless of Saleh being president.<sup>283</sup>

The assurances of continued US-Yemeni cooperation on counterterrorism provided by the opposition only reinforced the US perception, by then popular within the Obama administration, that Saleh's departure would best serve the US national interest. Hence, after the wounded Yemeni president was transferred to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment, the Department of Defense commented: "Our shared interest with the Yemeni government in defeating Al Qaeda goes beyond one person." Then, when Saleh abruptly returned to Yemen in September, the Department of State explained: "We want to see Yemen move forward on the basis of the GCC proposal, whether President Saleh is in or out of the country." Finally, the White House welcomed the approval of Resolution 2014 by the UN Security Council: "Today the international community sent a united and unambiguous signal to President Saleh that he must respond to the aspirations of the Yemeni people by transferring power immediately." The consistency of the messages coming from Washington confirmed that the Obama administration had moved past Saleh's rule in Yemen.<sup>284</sup>

Eventually, on November 23, after almost eleven months since the beginning of the uprising, President Saleh signed in Riyadh the GCC plan to hand over power. Saleh's decision to resign ended months of failed negotiations and political jostling. A combination of increasing international pressure and mounting domestic opposition had led a reluctant Yemeni president to conclude that signing the GCC plan was the least bad of the options he was confronted with. After all, the GCC plan offered Saleh an honorable exit, granted him immunity, and did not require him to go into

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<sup>283</sup> Jeremy Sharp, *Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations 28/12/2011* (Congressional Research Service, December 28, 2011), <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/180700.pdf>; Mohammed Ghobari, Cynthia Johnston, and David Stamp, "Yemen Strike Kills Mediator, Tribesmen Hit Pipeline," *Reuters*, May 25, 2010, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2010/05/25/uk-yemen-idUKTRE64O17W20100525>; Mark Mazzetti, "U.S. Is Intensifying a Secret Campaign of Yemen Airstrikes," *The New York Times*, June 8, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/09/world/middleeast/09intel.html?ref=yemen&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/09/world/middleeast/09intel.html?ref=yemen&_r=1&); Ulrichsen Kristian Coates, Chatham House Interview.

<sup>284</sup> Londono and Raghavan, "Yemeni Crowds Celebrate After President Transfers Power, Flies to Saudi Arabia"; Reuters, "US Urges Saleh to Step Down, Allow Yemen to Move On," September 23, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/09/23/yemen-usa-state-idUSS1E78M0FA20110923>; The White House, "Statement by the Press Secretary on the Passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2014," October 21, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/10/21/statement-press-secretary-passage-un-security-council-resolution-2014>.

exile. When considering the GCC offer, Saleh had perhaps in mind the different fates that had befallen President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Colonel Muammar Qaddafi in Libya.<sup>285</sup>

Given the significant amount of political capital that the United States had invested in finding a negotiated solution to the Yemeni crisis, it came as no surprise that the news of Saleh's resignation was warmly welcomed in Washington. President Obama described it as an "important step forward" that had brought the Yemeni people "closer to realizing their aspirations for a new beginning."<sup>286</sup>

Here, a point in particular bears noting. Although US role in easing President Saleh out of power was certainly important, it was not the primary factor behind the Yemeni president's decision to step down. However important, in fact, US leverage on Yemeni domestic politics had limits. The first limit was the vast influence of neighboring Saudi Arabia. The Saudis were Yemen's biggest foreign donor and maintained a time-tested network of patronage with many Yemeni tribes, including the Al Ahmars. Riyadh, and not Washington, was arguably the leading force behind the acceptance of the GCC plan by Yemeni opposing factions. A second constraint to US leverage was the local nature of Yemeni politics: domestic, and not foreign, considerations were the main drivers of Yemeni actors' decisions. Finally, a profound sense of disapproval, widespread among Yemenis, of US policies in the Middle East, including of US airstrikes in Yemen, was a third notable limit to US influence.<sup>287</sup>

## Continuity or Change

Early into the Yemeni uprising, demonstrators started to identify corruption and authoritarianism in the Saleh regime as the major obstacles to democratic and economic reforms in the country. The Obama administration was confronted with the choice of either siding with the demonstrators and supporting their demand for regime change or siding with President Saleh and helping this US ally to survive the unrest. Yet again, the US administration faced a situation where the US ideal interest of seeing democracy and freedom spreading in the Greater Middle East was at odds with major US

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<sup>285</sup> In fact, as of November 2011, Hosni Mubarak was in jail on charges of crimes committed by his regime and Muammar Qaddafi had been shot dead the previous month during a firefight. International Crisis Group, *Yemen: Enduring Conflicts, Threatened Transition*; Hughes Arthur, Director-General of the Egypt-Israel Multinational Force and Observers (1998-2004) Interview; Greenfield Danya, Atlantic Council Interview.

<sup>286</sup> Barack Obama, "Statement by President Obama on the Signing of the GCC-Brokered Agreement in Yemen" (The White House, November 23, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/23/statement-president-obama-signing-gcc-brokered-agreement-yemen>.

<sup>287</sup> Hughes Arthur, Director-General of the Egypt-Israel Multinational Force and Observers (1998-2004) Interview; Sharp, *Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations* 01/11/2012.

regional strategic interests, namely counterterrorism, access to Persian Gulf energy resources, and containment of Iran.

The response of the United States to the Yemeni uprising progressively moved from support to the regime to explicit calls for Saleh's resignation. The Obama administration's delayed and cautious embrace of the uprising is explained by the fact that US officials initially worried that Saleh's departure would threaten US interests, especially US counterterrorism campaign against AQAP. Over time, however, a number of considerations changed the US calculus. To begin with, even before the outbreak of the protests, administration officials believed that President Saleh had never been as reliable an ally as the United States had hoped. In addition, US officials came to realize that continued unrest and significant cracks within the regime were playing directly into the hands of Islamic extremist groups whose influence had markedly increased in the country. Moreover, the Yemeni opposition had provided credible assurances that US-Yemeni security cooperation would continue also in a post-Saleh scenario. Finally, Saudi Arabia, a US major ally and plausibly the most influential foreign actor involved in the Yemeni crisis, also advocated for a transition of power. All of the above convinced the Obama administration that Saleh's resignation was the best arrangement available to bring back some stability to Yemen and serve the broad US national interest, both strategic and ideal. Notably, with regard to the Yemeni uprising, this analysis could not detect any meaningful disagreement within the US executive (or between the executive and the Congress). Indeed, the White House, the Department of State, and the Department of Defense sent the same messages and maintained a common position throughout the crisis.

Although the United States eventually backed a transition of power in Yemen, US officials were extremely careful in not antagonizing Saleh and his supporters in the process. They did so by granting Saleh and his inner circle immunity from prosecution and by allowing him to keep the honorary title of president. Moreover, neither the GCC plan nor UNSC Resolution 2014 imposed any consequence on high-ranking members of the Saleh regime for their crackdown on demonstrators that, according to the Yemeni Ministry of Human Rights, had resulted, by the end of 2011, in 2,000 deaths. In addition, the Obama administration did not push hard for a complete overhaul of the regime either. US officials feared that the removal *en masse* of Saleh's family members and loyalists, many of whom occupied extremely sensitive positions within Yemeni Anti-Terrorism Units, would irremediably harm US ongoing fight against AQAP. Finally, US rhetoric also showed the hesitation of the US administration to hold Saleh and the regime directly accountable for the violence. In stark contrast with US presidential statements addressing the



Egyptian, Libyan, and Syrian uprisings, US President Obama never publicly said that the Yemeni president “had lost legitimacy”.<sup>288</sup>

To conclude, since the early 2000s, US foreign policy in Yemen had primarily focused on the fight against Islamic extremism, with democracy promotion being an afterthought. Although the Yemeni uprising represented an unexpected distraction, the overall Yemeni policy of the United States did not show any significant change as a result of it. In fact, the Obama administration cautiously threw its support behind the uprising only when US officials realized that Saleh’s hold on power had clearly become untenable and was actually threatening US strategic interests in the country. In other words, the Obama administration fully backed democracy promotion in Yemen only when this US ideal interest aligned with other US strategic interests, especially that of continuing the US campaign against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and its local affiliates.

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<sup>288</sup> Courtney Freer and Ibrahim Sharqieh, *Yemen Needs Action, Not Just Talk* (Brookings Institution, October 7, 2011), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2011/10/07-yemen-sharqieh>; Roth Kenneth, *Time to Abandon the Autocrats and Embrace Rights*, World Report (Human Rights Watch, 2011), <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2012/time-abandon-autocrats-and-embrace-rights>; Ahmed Al-Haj, “Yemen Death Toll: Over 2,000 Killed In Uprising,” *The Huffington Post*, March 18, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/19/yemen-death-toll\\_n\\_1361840.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/19/yemen-death-toll_n_1361840.html).

## Libya: a Convergence of Interests

### US-Libyan Relations prior to 2011

The state of Libya is a North African country that sits between Tunisia, on the west, and Egypt, on the east. Roughly 90 percent of Libya's six million inhabitants are Sunni Muslim. The country enjoys the benefits of having the largest proven oil reserves in Africa and among the ten largest globally. As a consequence, Libya's economy depends primarily on the energy sector that generates about 95% of export earnings, 80% of GDP, and 99% of government income. Before the outbreak of the 2011 uprising, oil wealth coupled with a small population gave Libya one of the highest GDPs per capita on the continent. However, despite these numbers, government policies under the autocratic and corrupted rule of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi had left many Libyans poor.<sup>289</sup>

In September 1969, a group of young military officers, who called themselves the Free Officers, seized power through a coup that overthrew King Idris, Libya's first and only monarch. It did not take long before Col. Muammar Qaddafi, who was among the main organizers of the military coup, gained prominence and became the sole leader of the new regime: the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya (State of the Masses). Since then, Qaddafi's policies put Libya at odds with the international community, especially with the United States. Libyan support for international radical causes (i.e. the Palestinian Abu Nidal Organization and the Irish Republican Army), sponsorship of revolutionary movements across Africa (i.e. the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone and the National Patriotic Front in Liberia), terrorist attacks that resulted in the death of US citizens (i.e. the 1986 "La Belle" discotheque attack in Berlin and the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie), and the pursuit of programs to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proved to be points of strong contention between leaders in Washington and Tripoli. In particular, US President Ronald Reagan defined the Libyan colonel "the mad dog of the Middle East" and responded to "La Belle" attack in Berlin by ordering a series of strikes against Libyan territory under the banner of Operation El Dorado Canyon. Over the years, the government of the United

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<sup>289</sup> US Energy Information Administration, "Country Analysis Brief: Libya," accessed October 18, 2014, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=LY>; Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook"; Dirk J. Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); John Wright, *A History of Libya* (London: Hurst, 2012).

States also offered support to anti-Qaddafi opposition groups and reportedly engaged in limited covert efforts at regime change.<sup>290</sup>

This US-Libyan distinctly tense relationship began to change after 2003, when Col. Qaddafi decided to renounce state-sponsored terrorism, to accept responsibility and to compensate the victims of previous attacks, and to stop Libya's programs on WMDs. Such remarkable decisions led to a gradual rehabilitation of the Qaddafi regime on the international stage. By the end of 2006, the US administration of President George W. Bush had lifted its unilateral sanctions on Libya, had removed the country from its list of states sponsoring terrorism, and had reopened the US embassy in Tripoli.<sup>291</sup> In 2008, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was the highest-ranking US official to visit Libya and meet with Col. Qaddafi in a half-century. Following the meeting, Secretary Rice said: "The relationship has been moving in a good direction for a number of years now and I think tonight does mark a new phase."<sup>292</sup>

After the 2003 rapprochement, policies to counter terrorism and the proliferation of WMDs became the major US strategic interest in Libya. In a 2008 diplomatic cable, US officials stated that Libya was "a strong partner in the war against terrorism" and that counterterrorism cooperation was "a key pillar of the U.S.-Libya bilateral relationship." Similarly, the US Department of State's 2008 Country Reports on Terrorism praised the Qaddafi regime for cooperating "with the United States and the international community to combat terrorism and terrorist financing." Further evidence of close US-Libyan cooperation came to the surface in September 2011, when hundreds of secret documents were discovered in the Libyan capital of Tripoli, that provided details on US renditions of terrorism suspects to Libyan authorities between 2002 and 2004. Along with a clear desire to win the favor of policymakers in Washington, Col. Qaddafi had another good reason for sharing the US strategic interest of combating extremist groups in North Africa. Local extremist groups, like Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group had, in fact, repeatedly

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<sup>290</sup> CQ Press, *The Middle East*; Christopher M. Blanchard, *Libya: Background and U.S. Relations* 16/03/2010 (Congressional Research Service, March 16, 2010), [http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RL33142\\_20100316.pdf](http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RL33142_20100316.pdf); Joseph Stanil, *El Dorado Canyon: Reagan's Undeclared War with Qaddafi* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2003); Bernard Gwertzman, "Shultz Advocates U.S. Covert Programs to Depose Qaddafi," *The New York Times*, April 28, 1986, <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/04/28/world/shultz-advocates-us-covert-programs-to-depose-qaddafi.html>; Clifford Krauss, "Failed Anti-Qaddafi Effort Leaves U.S. Picking Up the Pieces," *The New York Times*, March 12, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/12/world/failed-anti-qaddafi-effort-leaves-us-picking-up-the-pieces.html>.

<sup>291</sup> The United States had recalled its ambassador to Libya in 1972 and had successively closed the embassy in Tripoli in 1979, after the diplomatic compound was attacked and set on fire by a violent mob.

<sup>292</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard, *Libya: Transition and U.S. Policy* (Congressional Research Service, October 18, 2012), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33142.pdf>; US Embassy in Libya, "About the Embassy," accessed August 26, 2013, <http://libya.usembassy.gov/about.html>; The Associated Press, "Rice Meets Qaddafi on Historic Visit to Libya," *Fox News*, September 5, 2008, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2008/09/05/rice-meets-qaddafi-on-historic-visit-to-libya/>.

expressed their hostility toward Qaddafi and their willingness to fight in order to topple his regime.<sup>293</sup>

The administration of President G.W. Bush considered the rapprochement with Qaddafi's Libya a major foreign policy success. After taking office, the Barack Obama administration continued through political engagement and diplomatic enticements to build on that success. In its Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations for fiscal year 2010, the US administration laid out US policy priorities in Libya. According to this document, the United States would assist the Libyan government in improving its border control capabilities, especially with regard to the interdiction of WMD-related technologies. US assistance would also fund counterterrorism programs like the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership Initiative. Finally, US military assistance and training were expected to induce the Qaddafi regime to play a more responsible role in Africa. In particular, US officials hoped that Libya's security forces would police the regions of the Sahara and the Sahel, thus freeing up US military resources for other purposes. In June 2010, US Ambassador to Libya Gene Cretz publicly praised the regime of Col. Qaddafi for being "a model for global nuclear nonproliferation efforts" and "a strong ally in countering terrorism."<sup>294</sup>

Recent cooperation in countering terrorism and the proliferation of WMDs notwithstanding, US officials still had lingering reservations about the reliability of Muammar Qaddafi. In confidential cables leaked to the public, US diplomats described the Libyan leader as "mercurial" and "eccentric". In one of such cables, US Ambassador Cretz depicted Libya as "a kleptocracy in which the regime—either the Qaddafi family itself or its close political allies—has a direct stake in anything worth buying, selling, or owing." Moreover, even after the 2003 foreign policy shift, Col. Qaddafi maintained his public confrontational stance toward Israel, a major US ally in the region. Qaddafi opposed engagement and reconciliation with Israel in the face of the continued Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory and Israeli settlement activity. In addition, more than three decades of US-Libyan frictions had resulted in the absence of strong political, military, or commercial ties between

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<sup>293</sup> US Embassy in Tripoli, "US Embassy Cables: Profile of 'Intellectually Curious' but 'Notoriously Mercurial' Gaddafi" (The Guardian, August 29, 2008), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/167961>; US Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2008*, April 2009, 130, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/122599.pdf>; Abigail Hauslohner, "How Libya Seems to Have Helped the CIA with Rendition of Terrorism Suspects," *Time Magazine*, September 2, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2091653,00.html>; Al Jazeera, "Al-Qaeda Deputy Unveils Libya Wing," November 4, 2007, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2007/11/2008525121253767733.html>.

<sup>294</sup> US Department of State, "Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations FY2010, Volume II," 442; Gene Cretz, "Remarks by Ambassador Cretz at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace" (US Embassy in Tripoli, June 4, 2010), <http://libya.usembassy.gov/news-events/news-from-the-embassy2/remarks-by-ambassador-cretz-at-the-carnegie-endowment-for-international-peace.html>.

the two countries. Even with regard to energy resources, Libya was not particularly relevant to the United States insofar as, in 2011, US oil imports from the North African country were minimal.<sup>295</sup> Due to a long history of confrontation and persistent US concerns, it can be argued that, right before the outbreak of the Libyan uprising, the United States had no major national interest at stake either in Libya *per se* or in the rule of Col. Qaddafi. US counterterrorism and nonproliferation policies in Libya were indeed important but not as critical as those carried out by US forces elsewhere in the Greater Middle East, as for example in Yemen.<sup>296</sup>

### The Libyan Uprising and US Response

Inspired by popular movements in neighboring countries, opponents to the Qaddafi regime in Libya rose up in mid-February 2011. Between February 15 and 16, thousands of Libyans took to the streets in a number of cities across the country, including the eastern town of Benghazi, Libya's second largest. These protests were mostly spontaneous outbursts of popular anger. In fact, at the time of the 2011 uprising, and as a direct consequence of Qaddafi's 42 years of iron-first rule and systematic policy of quelling dissent, there was no significant organized opposition within the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. Echoing their counterparts throughout the Middle East, Libyan demonstrators chanted slogans against the "corrupt rulers of the country" and for "an end of the regime". They shared the widespread popular perception that the economic and social opportunities that had opened up since Libya's international rehabilitation in 2003 had remained in the hands of a deeply corrupted and self-serving elite, namely the Qaddafi family and his cronies. Contrary to what happened in Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen, peaceful protests in Libya quickly turned violent. News reports described Libyan demonstrators, armed with rocks and gasoline bombs, clashing with riot police and attacking state security forces' buildings. The Libyan government responded in kind and, on February 17, state security forces used live ammunition to disperse demonstrators, killing at least 24. The Obama administration's first reaction to the unrest in Libya was to condemn "the use of

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<sup>295</sup> US imports of Libyan oil amounted to 70 thousand barrels per day (bpd) in 2010 compared, for example, to the 1,023 bpd imported from Nigeria during the same year. See US Energy Information Administration, *US Imports by Country of Origin*, accessed October 18, 2014,

[http://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/pet\\_move\\_impcus\\_a2\\_nus\\_ep00\\_im0\\_mbbldpd\\_a.htm](http://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/pet_move_impcus_a2_nus_ep00_im0_mbbldpd_a.htm).

<sup>296</sup> Warren Strobel, "Wikileaks: 'Voluptuous' Nurse Cable Costs Diplomat His Job," *McClatchy Newspapers*, January 4, 2011, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/01/04/106191/wikileaks-voluptuous-nurse-cable.html>; Gene Cretz, "Al-Qadhafi: The Philosopher-King Keeps His Hand In" (US Department of State, January 29, 2009), [https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TRIPOLI68\\_a.html](https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TRIPOLI68_a.html); Blanchard, *Libya: Background and U.S. Relations 16/03/2010*; Mezran Karim, Atlantic Council Interview, interview by Eugenio Lilli, January 23, 2013; Wehrey Frederic, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Interview, interview by Eugenio Lilli, February 6, 2013.

violence” and to urge the Libyan government “to show restraint in responding to peaceful protests, and to respect the rights of [its] people.”<sup>297</sup>

During the following days, the uprising spread to the Libyan capital and Qaddafi’s stronghold of Tripoli. Moreover, government troops sent to Benghazi with the task of crashing the opposition sided instead with the latter and helped demonstrators to seize the local military barracks. Benghazi’s military defections were the prelude to the quick dissolution of the Libyan armed forces. The main explanation to the rapid breakdown of the Libyan military in the face of the 2011 mass protests lies in the feeble and fragmented nature of such an institution where tribal affiliation mattered more than loyalty to the state. This was also a consequence of Col. Qaddafi’s deliberate policy of keeping the armed forces weak and divided in order to prevent the emergence from their ranks of any potential would-be challenger.<sup>298</sup> Throughout his rule, Qaddafi had maintained his grip on power by relying on his special security forces. Libyan special security forces were militarily superior to the regular army and were led and staffed by the colonel’s family, loyalists, and tribe. As such, their fate was inextricably tied to that of Qaddafi and his regime, and they were therefore ready to defend him to the last.<sup>299</sup>

Confronted by mounting opposition, the Qaddafi regime employed its full force against the protesters. In Tripoli, in particular, the regime reportedly sent security forces, civilian loyalists, and foreign mercenaries, supported by aircraft and helicopters, to clamp down on the opposition. In a televised address to the nation, the Libyan leader promised to fight “until the last drop of [his] blood”. The violence unleashed by Qaddafi opened the first cracks within the regime: government’s

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<sup>297</sup> Alan Cowell, “Protests Take Aim at Leader of Libya,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/17/world/middleeast/17libya.html?\\_r=1&ref=libya](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/17/world/middleeast/17libya.html?_r=1&ref=libya); Al Jazeera, “Libyan Police Stations Torched,” February 16, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/02/20112167051422444.html>; International Crisis Group, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (V): Making Sense of Libya*, Middle East/North Africa Report, June 6, 2011, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/107%20-%20Popular%20Protest%20in%20North%20Africa%20and%20the%20Middle%20East%20V%20-%20Making%20Sense%20of%20Libya.pdf>; Human Rights Watch, *Libya: Security Forces Fire on “Day of Anger” Demonstrations*, February 18, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/02/17/libya-security-forces-fire-day-anger-demonstrations>; Obama, “Statement by the President on Violence in Bahrain, Libya and Yemen 18/02/2011.”

<sup>298</sup> Qaddafi’s suspicion of the Libyan armed forces originated from a number of failed military-led coups against his rule that had taken place since the 1970s, including one in 1993.

<sup>299</sup> Al Jazeera, “Uprising Flares in Libyan City,” February 20, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/02/201122014259976293.html>; David D. Kirkpatrick and Mona El-Naggar, “Qaddafi’s Son Warns of Civil War as Libyan Protests Widen,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/21/world/africa/21libya.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1&ref=libya](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/21/world/africa/21libya.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&ref=libya); International Crisis Group, *Holding Libya Together: Security Challenges After Qadhafi*, Middle East/North Africa Report, December 14, 2011, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/115%20Holding%20Libya%20Together%20-%20Security%20Challenges%20after%20Qadhafi.pdf>; Akram Al-Turk, “Libya: From Revolt to State-Building,” in *The Arab Awakening* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011).

ministers, military officers, and diplomats resigned from their posts or sided altogether with the protesters. Meanwhile, a *de facto* division of Libya was taking shape on the ground: in the west, Qaddafi's forces were tightening their grip on Tripoli, while a fledgling Libyan opposition, supported by defected troops, seemed to have established control over a number of cities in the eastern region of Cyrenaica, especially near the border with Egypt.<sup>300</sup>

As violence escalated, US President Obama stated that his administration's "highest priority" was to guarantee the safety of US citizens in Libya. The underlying reason behind this specific US concern was the Obama administration's fear that had the United States been too critical too soon of the Libyan government, the "eccentric" and "mercurial" Qaddafi could have retaliated against US citizens. Unsurprisingly then, when most Americans were safely out of the country, US officials became more outspoken in their criticism of the Libyan regime. Hence, on February 25, the White House announced its "decision to move forward with unilateral sanctions, [...] coordinated sanctions with our European allies, and multilateral efforts to hold the Libyan government accountable through the United Nations." The White House also declared that the United States had "suspended the very limited military cooperation it had with Libya" and had halted "the sale of spare military parts" to Libyan armed forces. As part of the US unilateral sanctions, President Obama signed Executive Order 13566 that froze about \$30 billion in assets belonging to the Qaddafi family and other Libyan entities.<sup>301</sup>

At the international level, the Obama administration co-sponsored UN Security Council Resolution 1970. Resolution 1970 was unanimously approved by the UN Security Council on February 26. It condemned the "violence and use of force against civilians," referred Libya to the International

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<sup>300</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick and Mona El-Naggar, "Qaddafi's Grip Falters as His Forces Take On Protesters," *The New York Times*, February 21, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/22/world/africa/22libya.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=0&ref=libya](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/22/world/africa/22libya.html?pagewanted=1&_r=0&ref=libya); Al Jazeera, "Defiant Gaddafi Vows to Fight On," February 23, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/02/201122216458913596.html>; Al Jazeera, "Libyan Diplomats Defect En Masse," February 22, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/02/201122275739377867.html>; Kareem Fahim and David D. Kirkpatrick, "Qaddafi's Grip on the Capital Tightens as Revolt Grows," *The New York Times*, February 22, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/23/world/africa/23libya.html?pagewanted=1&ref=libya>; Al Jazeera, "Gaddafi Loses More Libyan Cities," 2011 February 24, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/02/2011223125256699145.html>.

<sup>301</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on Libya 23/02/2011" (The White House, February 23, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/23/remarks-president-libya>; Jay Carney, "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 25/02/2011" (The White House, February 25, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/25/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-2252011>; Mark Landler and Thom Shanker, "U.S. Readies Military Options on Libya," *The New York Times*, February 28, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/01/world/africa/01military.html?ref=libya&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/01/world/africa/01military.html?ref=libya&_r=1&); Barack Obama, "Executive Order 13566 --Libya" (The White House, February 25, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/25/executive-order-libya>.

Criminal Court,<sup>302</sup> called for an arms embargo on the country, froze state assets, and imposed a travel ban on Qaddafi and his inner circle. On the same day, President Obama had a phone call with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. While the two leaders were discussing the crisis in Libya, the US president expressed his strongest public rebuke yet toward Col. Qaddafi: “when a leader’s only means of staying in power is to use mass violence against his own people, he has lost the legitimacy to rule and needs to do what is right for his country by leaving now.” In a marked departure from the cautious US stance toward the uprisings in Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen, in the case of Libya, the Obama administration showed no particular hesitation in sanctioning the Libyan regime, saying that Qaddafi had lost legitimacy, or urging the Libyan leader to step down.<sup>303</sup>

In the meantime, the US State and Defense departments worked assiduously to give the US president the largest range of policy options possible, including the use of military force. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with US allies in Geneva, Switzerland, to confer about the Libyan crisis. After the meeting, Secretary Clinton told reporters that “no option is off the table [...] that of course include[s] a no fly zone.” From its part, the Department of Defense announced it was repositioning US naval and air forces around Libya in order to provide the United States with the flexibility necessary to use them “if needed”.<sup>304</sup>

It is relevant to observe, at this point, that when it came to condemning Col. Qaddafi for his violent crackdown on demonstrators, imposing unilateral sanctions, and supporting international efforts against the Libyan regime, the Obama administration displayed a strong unity of purpose. The same consensus among US officials was not achieved, however, on the issue of the use of military force. Indeed, on the sensitive issue of employing US armed forces to address the Libyan crisis, the Obama administration appeared divided into two camps. On the one hand, Secretary of State Clinton, Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice, and Special Assistant to the President for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights Samantha Power were strong advocates of the use of military force, especially of the need to impose a no-fly zone over Libya. They argued that a

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<sup>302</sup> It was only the second time in its entire history that the Security Council took the decision to refer a country to the ICC; the other case occurred in 2005 when the Security Council called for an investigation on violence and crimes against humanity in the Darfur region of Sudan.

<sup>303</sup> US Department of State, “Digest of United States Practice in International Law 2011,” 2011, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/194098.pdf>; UN Security Council, “Resolution 1970,” February 26, 2011, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/245/58/PDF/N1124558.pdf?OpenElement>; Barack Obama, “Readout of President Obama’s Call with Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany” (The White House, February 26, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/26/readout-president-obamas-call-chancellor-angela-merkel-germany>.

<sup>304</sup> Landler and Shanker, “U.S. Readies Military Options on Libya”; Jim Garamone, “Troops Re-Positioned to Provide Options on Libya” (US Department of Defense, February 28, 2011), <http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=62963>.



military intervention was necessary in order to stop the violence. On the other hand, Secretary of Defense Gates, National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen expressed more caution about the possibility of employing US armed forces. They did not discount the seriousness of the violence in Libya but they contended that a no-fly zone would be difficult to implement, would likely divert assets from other ongoing US military operations in the region (namely Afghanistan and Iraq), and could be seen as foreign meddling in Libya's domestic affairs, thereby delegitimizing the cause of the Libyan protesters.<sup>305</sup>

By the end of February, credible accounts put the number of uprising-related deaths in Libya to 1,000. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees maintained that since the beginning of the unrest almost 100,000 individuals had fled Libya into Tunisia and Egypt (this number almost doubled in early March). Militarily, anti-Qaddafi forces started a thrust in March toward west and seized control of several coastal cities, including some important oil-export terminals. Politically, a previously disorganized opposition coalesced into the Transitional National Council (TNC) whose main tasks were to act as the united political face of the uprising and provide a single address for the uprising's international supporters. By March 6, however, Qaddafi's forces had regrouped and began to strike back, successfully advancing into opposition-held territory in the east. Qaddafi loyalists' effective counteroffensive prompted the TNC to call on the international community "to protect the Libyan people from any further genocide and crimes against humanity." On March 17, Col. Qaddafi announced that an attack against the opposition's *de facto* capital Benghazi was in fact imminent. The Libyan leader put the protesters on notice: "We will come house by house, room by room. It's over. The issue has been decided [...] We will find you in your closets. We will have no mercy and no pity."<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Susan Rice, "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney and U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Susan Rice, 28/02/2011" (White House, February 28, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/28/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-and-us-permanent-representativ>; Elisabeth Bumiller, "Gates Plays Down Idea of U.S. Force in Libya," *The New York Times*, March 1, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/02/world/africa/02military.html?ref=libya>; Wehrey Frederic, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Interview; Mezran Karim, Atlantic Council Interview.

<sup>306</sup> Adrian Blomfield, "Libya: 'More than 1,000 Dead,'" *The Telegraph*, February 23, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8342543/Libya-more-than-1000-dead.html>; UN High Commissioner for Refugees, "UNHCR Emergency Teams Supporting Tunisians and Egyptians to Respond to Tens of Thousands Fleeing Violence in Libya," February 27, 2011, <http://www.unhcr.org/4d6a2a4d9.html>; David D. Kirkpatrick and Kareem Fahim, "In Libya, Both Sides Gird for Long War as Civilian Toll Mounts," *The New York Times*, March 5, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/06/world/africa/06libya.html?pagewanted=1&ref=libya>; Kareem Fahim, "Rebel Advance in Libya Set Back by Heavy Assault," *The New York Times*, March 6, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/07/world/africa/07libya.html?ref=libya>; Libyan National Transitional Council, "Founding Statement of the Interim Transitional National Council (TNC)," March 5, 2011, <http://www.ntclibya.org/english/founding-statement-of-the-interim-transitional-national-council/>; Dan Bilefsky and Mark Landler, "As U.N. Backs Military Action in Libya, U.S. Role Is Unclear," *The New York Times*, March 17, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/18/world/africa/18nations.html?ref=libya&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/18/world/africa/18nations.html?ref=libya&_r=1&).

Qaddafi's unambiguous threat of carrying out a massacre raised the urgency for the international community to act. The US Department of State mobilized. On the sidelines of a G8 summit in Paris, Secretary Clinton met with a leader of the beleaguered Libyan TNC; the first such a contact between a senior US official and a formal representative of the Libyan opposition. Although conducted entirely behind closed doors and not followed by any public statement, the meeting was a further sign of the Obama administration's support for the Libyan uprising. In Paris, Secretary Clinton also met with the foreign minister of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). There have been speculations about the significance of the latter meeting. In fact, on the same day, March 14, the UAE had joined other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in military operations allegedly aimed at defusing tensions in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Some observers argued that the United States acquiesced to the GCC action in Bahrain in exchange for the UAE's commitment to take an active role in any prospective military intervention in Libya. For the Obama administration the support and the participation of Arab countries was an essential prerequisite for any US involvement in Libya. As for the GCC countries, their leaders perhaps viewed backing a pro-uprising military intervention in Libya as an opportunity to divert public attention from the contemporaneous violent crackdown on popular dissent they were endorsing in Bahrain. At the time of this writing, it has not been possible to verify the accuracy of these speculations, however, because of the timing of the GCC intervention in Bahrain and of the US-UAE meeting in Paris, it is not completely far-fetched to think that developments in Libya and Bahrain were somehow connected.<sup>307</sup>

On the day Qaddafi threatened to attack Benghazi, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1973. The resolution demanded "the immediate establishment of a cease-fire" and authorized UN member states "to take all necessary measures [...] to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, including Benghazi, while excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory." UNSC Resolution 1973 effectively opened the door to an international military intervention and to the establishment of a no-fly zone over Libya.<sup>308</sup> Asked to comment on the adoption of the UNSC resolution, US Ambassador to the

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<sup>307</sup> BBC, "Clinton Meets Libyan Opposition Figure Mahmoud Jibril," March 15, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12741414>; Steven L Myers, "Clinton Meets in Paris With Libyan Rebel Leader," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2011, [The New York Times, March 18, 2011, \[<sup>308</sup> UNSC Resolution 1973 on Libya probably amounted to the highest-profile test to date of the international doctrine of Responsibility-to-Protect \\(R2P\\). R2P holds that governments could not be permitted to forsake their responsibility to\]\(http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/19/world/africa/19policy.html?pagewanted=1&\_r=3&gwh=7E49513583E8908A447C005D34B2FE4B&ref=libya& Lynch, <i>The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East</i>.</a></p>
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United Nations Rice emphasized that the Obama administration was “very pleased” with the outcome of the vote. In the wake of the UN vote, President Obama declared that “The United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Arab states agree that a ceasefire must be implemented immediately. That means all attacks against civilians must stop.” Obama made clear that “These terms are not subject to negotiation. If Qaddafi does not comply with the resolution, the international community will impose consequences, and the resolution will be enforced through military action.”<sup>309</sup>

The Libyan regime responded to the mounting international pressure by announcing a ceasefire. Despite the regime’s public statements, news outlets continued to report credible accounts of government forces’ attacks against opposition-held cities. When it appeared clear that the announcement of a ceasefire was yet another ruse by Col. Qaddafi to deceive the international community and gain more time to continue his crackdown on the opposition, a coalition of countries resolved to take military action against him. With the stated goal of enforcing UNSC Resolution 1973, on 19 March 2011, US and British warships and submarines launched more than one hundred Tomahawk cruise missiles on Libyan soil, while US, French, and British fighter jets fired against Qaddafi’s defense systems, airfields, and ground forces.<sup>310</sup>

A few days into the military operations, US President Obama described his administration’s decision to commit US armed forces in Libya as “in America’s national interest.” The Libyan uprising, in fact, was a perfect case of convergence among different US national interests. The US administration explained its support for the anti-Qaddafi opposition primarily in terms of US ideal interests: stopping “actions that undermine global peace and security”, preventing Qaddafi to “commit atrocities”, avoiding a “humanitarian crisis”, and defending “the democratic values” the United States stands for. These noble objectives went hand in hand with a number of US strategic

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protect their citizens from atrocities, nor could they be allowed to commit such atrocities themselves. R2P also maintains that the ultimate responsibility to protect civilians rests with the international community. UNSC Resolution 1973 passed with ten votes, including that of the United States, and five abstentions from Brazil, China, Germany, India, and Russia.

<sup>309</sup> UN Security Council, “Resolution 1973,” March 17, 2011,

[http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1973%282011%29](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1973%282011%29); Susan Rice, “Remarks by Ambassador Susan E. Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, at the Security Council Stakeout on UN Security Council Resolution 1973” (US Mission to the United Nations, March 17, 2011),

<http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/2011/158563.htm>; Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on the Situation in Libya 18/03/2011” (The White House, March 18, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/18/remarks-president-situation-libya>.

<sup>310</sup> CNN, “Report: Fighter Jet Shot down Near Benghazi,” March 19, 2011,

<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/03/18/libya.civil.war/>; BBC, “David Cameron Cautious Over Libya Ceasefire Offer,” March 18, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12784729>; The POMED Wire, “Libya Update: Gadhafi Assault Continues Despite ‘Ceasefire,’” *POMED*, March 18, 2011,

<http://pomed.org/blog/2011/03/libya-gadhafi-assault-continues-despite-ceasefire.html/>; CNN, “Gunfire, Explosions Heard in Tripoli,” March 20, 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/03/19/libya.civil.war/>.

interests. First, US military participation together with many US allies, especially European allies, would serve the US strategic purpose of fostering transatlantic relations and preserving the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a credible and functioning alliance in the twenty-first century. Second, the military intervention would prevent violence to spread to Libya's neighbors, especially Egypt, therefore reducing the likelihood of destabilizing spillover effects across the region at a very delicate time. Finally, US military backing of the Libyan uprising would have the potential to be an effective exercise in public relations insofar as it could be used by the United States to fend off criticisms about the US administration's quasi-silent response to contemporaneous events in Bahrain.<sup>311</sup>

The absence of any meaningful conflict between ideal interests and strategic interests undoubtedly facilitated the Obama administration's decision to back the anti-Qaddafi opposition. The eventual US decision to participate in military operations in Libya was also made easier by other factors. To begin with, US administration officials that had previously expressed skepticism about the wisdom of getting militarily involved in the Libyan crisis came to see the option of a military intervention under a more positive light. For example, Defense Secretary Gates, an early skeptic, stated in front of the US House Armed Services Committee that, by early March, "it became apparent that the time and conditions were right for international military action." Secretary Gates's shift of position mostly depended on two additional factors that significantly informed the political calculus in Washington: the willingness of European countries to commit "real military resources" in Libya and the open endorsement by Arab countries of military action. These developments would reduce both the burden of the military operations for the US armed forces and diminish the perception that the military intervention in Libya would be yet another example of Western neo-colonialism in the Greater Middle East. Broad international support in favor of the Libyan opposition made the international isolation that characterized the Qaddafi regime only more evident. The latter was another facilitating factor leading to the US military involvement in the North African country. Since the beginning of the uprising, in fact, international and regional organizations had strongly condemned the violence unleashed by the Libyan government against protesters. Along with the resolutions issued by the United Nations, words of condemnation came from the African Union, the

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<sup>311</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama and President Funes of El Salvador in Joint Press Conference" (White House, March 22, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/22/remarks-president-obama-and-president-funes-el-salvador-joint-press-conf>; Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Situation in Libya 18/03/2011"; Nikolas Gvosdev and Ray Takeyh, "Triumph of the New Wilsonism," *The National Interest*, January 4, 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/article/decline-western-realism-6274>; Indyk, Lieberthal, and O'Hanlon, *Bending History: Barack Obama's Foreign Policy*; Al-Turk, "Libya: From Revolt to State-Building."

Organization of the Islamic Conference, and the Arab League.<sup>312</sup> The Arab League also decided for the suspension of Libya's membership and quickly endorsed at the UN Security Council the TNC plea for imposing a no-fly zone. All of this added to the fact, already explained above, that the Obama administration was not particularly invested in its relationship with Col. Qaddafi and, therefore, did not perceive the Libyan ruler as indispensable to protect any vital US strategic interest.<sup>313</sup>

On March 31, NATO officially took control of the international military effort in Libya under the code name of Operation Unified Protector (OUP). After command of the operations passed to NATO, US aircraft stopped to perform ground strikes. The United States still provided unique and indispensable capabilities to the international military effort but the role of the US armed forces shifted from kinetic actions to a role of support for logistics, intelligence-gathering, reconnaissance, refueling, and surveillance. Many observers noted that foreign intervention in Libya saved not only the lives of civilians in besieged Benghazi but also the totality of the anti-Qaddafi forces from annihilation. However important, foreign intervention did not provide the Libyan opposition with the necessary edge to gain the upper hand in the conflict. The main effect, therefore, was "to freeze" the fighting on the ground; a precondition for the military stalemate that followed.<sup>314</sup>

As the crisis in Libya dragged on, the broad consensus that had surrounded the March 19 military intervention began to weaken. On the domestic front, the Obama administration increasingly became the target of criticism from the US Congress. Lawmakers on Capitol Hill questioned President Obama's authority to commit US troops without formal congressional approval (as required by the War Powers Resolution of 1973) and pressured the US administration to provide more information on the missions, costs, and objectives of US participation in OUP. The

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<sup>312</sup> Qaddafi's relations with Arab countries, and in particular with Saudi Arabia, had deteriorated in the previous years. In March 2003 the Libyan leader had a heated exchange of insults with the Saudi crown prince at an Arab League meeting. Subsequently, Qaddafi was even suspected for plotting an assassination attempt against the crown prince. In a sign of persistent acrimony between the two countries, the Libyan government decided not to take part in an Arab League meeting held in the Saudi capital Riyadh in 2007. See: CQ Press, *The Middle East*.

<sup>313</sup> US House Armed Services Committee, "Robert R. Gates Statement on Libya," March 31, 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1551>; Vesselin Popovski, *Fighting the Colonel: UN Security Council Sanctions on Libya* (United Nations University, May 10, 2011), <http://unu.edu/publications/articles/fighting-the-colonel.html#info>; Ethan Bronner and David E. Sanger, "Arab League Endorses No-Flight Zone Over Libya," *The New York Times*, March 12, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/world/middleeast/13libya.html?ref=libya>; Mezran Karim, Atlantic Council Interview.

<sup>314</sup> NATO, "Operation UNIFIED PROTECTOR Protection of Civilians and Civilian-Populated Areas & Enforcement of the No-Fly Zone," October 2011, [http://www.nato.int/nato\\_static/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2011\\_10/20111005\\_111005-factsheet\\_protection\\_civilians.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2011_10/20111005_111005-factsheet_protection_civilians.pdf); Karen DeYoung, "U.S., Europeans Step up Efforts to Aid Libyan Rebels," *The Washington Post*, April 21, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/libya-vows-to-fight-any-foreign-troops-on-its-soil-rebuffs-eu-proposal/2011/04/19/AF7GP34D\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/libya-vows-to-fight-any-foreign-troops-on-its-soil-rebuffs-eu-proposal/2011/04/19/AF7GP34D_story.html); International Crisis Group, *Holding Libya Together: Security Challenges After Qadhafi*; Steven Erlanger, "War in Libya Could Drag On, Military Analysts Say," *The New York Times*, April 20, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/21/world/africa/21nato.html?ref=libya&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/21/world/africa/21nato.html?ref=libya&_r=1&); UK Officer, Royal Air Force, Interview, interview by Eugenio Lilli, February 13, 2013.

administration replied that the president's decision to send troops had not violated US law. Administration officials noted that military action had been authorized only after consultation with the bipartisan leadership of the US Congress and argued that such a consultation was enough for authorizing what they described as a limited military campaign. President Obama and his team saved no energy to stress that US participation in OUP was "limited" and that the United States was not "leading" the military operations.<sup>315</sup> In this effort to assuage a concerned US Congress, the Obama administration consistently described its "official" Libya policy as grounded on two tenets. First, administration officials insisted that the United States would not deploy troops on the ground, thus limiting the risk of US casualties. Second, the US administration announced it would provide anti-Qaddafi forces only with non-lethal aid, that included vehicles, body armors, uniforms, and tents, but no weapons, therefore decreasing the likelihood that US arms would end in the hands of extremist groups. We know now that the Obama administration's "unofficial" policy in Libya was somehow different. For example, CIA operatives were indeed "on the ground" since the early phases of the fighting to gather intelligence for military strikes and to contact and vet anti-Qaddafi forces. In addition, President Obama reportedly signed a presidential finding authorizing US covert support for the Libyan opposition, including the possibility to ship arms to the rebels.<sup>316</sup> Moreover, the United States approved arms transfers from other countries, such as Qatar and to various extents the UAE, Sudan, and Egypt. Despite these discrepancies between the official and unofficial accounts of US policy in Libya, the heated confrontation between the Obama administration and the US Congress progressively lost its centrality in the US political debate. In fact, over time, military developments in Libya made the prospect of a US prolonged involvement, requiring sustained deployment of US forces and costly investments, increasingly unlikely.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> This fact contributed to the popularity of the expression "leading from behind" as the catch-phrase generally used to describe US involvement in Libya. See: Ryan Lizza, "How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy," *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2011, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa\\_fact\\_lizza](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa_fact_lizza).

<sup>316</sup> To date, there has not been hard evidence confirming that the US administration eventually shipped such weapons.

<sup>317</sup> On the Obama administration-US Congress debate over Libya see for example: US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "Hearing on Military Intervention in Libya," April 6, 2011, <http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Lugar%20Opening%20Statement%20Libya%20040611.pdf>; And this: US House Committee on Foreign Affairs, "War Powers, United States Operations in Libya, and Related Legislation," May 25, 2011, <http://archives.republicans.foreignaffairs.house.gov/112/66533.pdf>; "War Powers Resolution"; Helene Cooper, "Obama Cites Limits of U.S. Role in Libya," *The New York Times*, March 28, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/29/world/africa/29prexy.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1&ref=libya](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/29/world/africa/29prexy.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&ref=libya); Mark Mazzetti and Michael Schmidt, "U.S.-Approved Arms for Libya Rebels Fell Into Jihadis' Hands," *The New York Times*, December 5, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/06/world/africa/weapons-sent-to-libyan-rebels-with-us-approval-fell-into-islamist-hands.html?pagewanted=1&ref=libya>; Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, "C.I.A. Agents in Libya Aid Airstrikes and Meet Rebels," *The New York Times*, March 30, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/31/world/africa/31intel.html>; Mark Hosenball, "Exclusive: Obama Authorizes Secret Help for Libya Rebels," *Reuters*, March 30, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/30/us-libya-usa-order-idUSTRE72T6H220110330>; The Telegraph, "Libya Crisis: Egypt Shipping Arms Across Border to Aid Rebels," March 18, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8390521/Libya-crisis-Egypt->

On the international front, the initial large support built around UNSC Resolution 1973 quickly faded away. Russia and China, two veto-wielding members of the UN Security Council, soon began to accuse NATO of overstepping the UN mandate to protect civilians and of pursuing, instead, a secret agenda for regime change. The Atlantic Alliance firmly rejected Russian and Chinese charges. Although Western officials repeatedly denied outright the existence of a military plan for regime change in Libya, some observers suggested that the United States, Britain, and France were essentially “uninterested in real negotiations” with the Libyan government and that the unstated goal of OUP was indeed to put an end to Qaddafi’s rule in the country. Notably, in conversations with US and UK senior officials familiar with the events we were told that during the Libyan crisis there were no meaningful attempts by the West to engage Col. Qaddafi diplomatically. NATO, on the contrary, repeatedly backed the TNC’s position that, as a precondition for any negotiation, Qaddafi had to go.<sup>318</sup>

Domestic and international debates on NATO military operations in Libya lost much of their relevance when NATO-backed Libyan opposition forces eventually achieved military victory. By mid-August, anti-Qaddafi troops began to make significant advances and, on August 23, they occupied the capital Tripoli. Exploiting the momentum produced by the conquest of Tripoli, the opposition moved toward the last two remaining bastions of Qaddafi’s support: the cities of Bani Walid and Sirte (Qaddafi’s birthplace). After a fierce confrontation, Bani Walid fell on October 17, followed by Sirte on October 20. On that eventful day, in Sirte, opposition fighters found, chased, and killed Col. Qaddafi. The exact dynamics of the killing are not clear, with people arguing that Qaddafi was killed in a cross-fire and others saying that he was instead executed. Whatever the case, pictures and videos of the colonel’s corpse posted on the internet were an unmistakable sign of the end of an era for all Libyans. Qaddafi’s death also resulted in the conclusion of NATO military campaign and the debates surrounding it.<sup>319</sup>

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shipping-arms-across-border-to-aid-rebels.html; Alex De Waal, “African Roles in the Libyan Conflict of 2011,” *International Affairs* 89, no. II (2013).

<sup>318</sup> Helen Pidd, “NATO Rejects Russian Claims of Libya Mission Creep,” *The Guardian*, April 15, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/15/nato-libya-rasmussen-medvedev-criticism>; James M. Dorsey, “China and Russia Redraw International Battles Lines on Libya,” *Al-Arabiya*, June 30, 2011, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/06/30/155512.html>; De Waal, “African Roles in the Libyan Conflict of 2011,” 374; Dibble Elizabeth, US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Interview; Alistair Burt, UK Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Meeting During an Event Organized by the Global Strategic Forum in London, interview by Eugenio Lilli, January 21, 2014; International Crisis Group, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (V): Making Sense of Libya*.

<sup>319</sup> Thomas Erdbrink and Liz Sly, “Libyan Rebels Storm Gaddafi Compound in Tripoli,” *The Washington Post*, August 24, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/appearance-by-gaddafis-son-tempers-rebel-hopes-of-victory/2011/08/23/gIQAZMWZYJ\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/appearance-by-gaddafis-son-tempers-rebel-hopes-of-victory/2011/08/23/gIQAZMWZYJ_story.html); International Crisis Group, *Holding Libya Together: Security Challenges After Qadhafi*; Kareem Fahim, Anthony Shadid, and Rick Gladstone, “Violent End to an Era as Qaddafi Dies in Libya,” *The New York Times*, October 20, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/21/world/africa/qaddafi-is->

The White House described the termination of the autocratic rule of Muammar Qaddafi as a foreign policy success that vindicated the Obama administration's decision to intervene militarily in support of the Libyan uprising. Vice-President Joe Biden enthusiastically said that "NATO got it right" and noted that during Operation Unified Protector the United States "spent \$2 billion total and did not lose a single life." Likewise, President Obama praised US contribution to the multilateral military effort and hailed the news of Qaddafi's death as "a momentous day in the history of Libya."<sup>320</sup>

### **Continuity or Change**

When Libyans rose up against the corrupted and undemocratic rule of Col. Qaddafi, the Obama administration faced a foreign policy crisis where US ideal and strategic interests converged. In Libya both these clusters of the US national interest pointed to a US response in support of the popular uprising. Backing the Libyan uprising would serve the US ideal interests of spreading economic, social, and democratic reforms in the Greater Middle East, protecting civilians from the brutality of an oppressive regime, and avoiding a severe humanitarian crisis. At the same time, US endorsement of the anti-Qaddafi opposition would contribute to the protection of a number of US strategic interests: fostering transatlantic relations, justifying the role of NATO in the twenty-first century, preventing violence from spreading and destabilizing Libya's neighbors, and offering a public relations opportunity to rebut criticisms regarding the US quasi-silence over government repression of popular demonstrations in Bahrain. This convergence of interests was made possible mostly because of the uneasy nature of the relationship between Washington and the Libyan government. Indeed, contrary to the cases of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, the Al Khalifas in Bahrain, and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, the Obama administration had no vital national interest in keeping Col. Qaddafi in power. Qaddafi's cooperation on the strategic issues of counterterrorism and nonproliferation was indeed important but certainly not critical for the larger US counterterrorism and nonproliferation effort in the Greater Middle East.

Given the absence of any detectable tension between US ideal and strategic interests in Libya, US foreign policy rhetoric showed a particularly high level of consistency with the actual US policies implemented on the ground. Hence, US public statements of support for the demands of the Libyan

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killed-as-libyan-forces-take-surt.html?ref=libya&\_r=0; NATO, "NATO Secretary General Makes Historic Libya Trip," October 31, 2011, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news\\_80100.html](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_80100.html).

<sup>320</sup> Will Femia, "Biden Makes the Case for the Libyan Mission," *MSNBC*, October 20, 2011, <http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/biden-makes-the-case-the-libyan-miss>; Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Death of Muammar Qaddafi" (White House, October 20, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/10/20/remarks-president-death-muammar-qaddafi>.



protesters were followed by concrete actions, such as the early imposition of unilateral sanctions and a sustained diplomatic effort aimed at increasing international pressure on the Qaddafi regime. In addressing the Libyan crisis, the White House, the State Department, and the Defense Department generally spoke with a single voice. Some divergent opinions within the Obama administration momentarily arose when US officials discussed the possibility to commit US troops to a multilateral military campaign in Libya. Nevertheless, by early March 2011, such divergences had seemingly been resolved and, eventually, the administration solidly endorsed the military option. Libyan opposition forces' military victory over Qaddafi forces and the very death of the Libyan autocrat seemed to vindicate the Obama administration's policies. However, eight months of intense armed conflict had exacted a high toll on Libya's economy and had severely tarnished the country's social fabric therefore anticipating difficult times ahead. Moreover, disagreement among UN Security Council members concerning the interpretation of Resolution 1973 and the scope of OUP would have significant repercussions on the future ability of the UNSC to act in Syria.

All that considered, in 2011 Libya the United States faced a crisis where US ideal interests converged with US strategic interests. Moreover, US officials justified the military intervention in support of the Libyan uprising on broadly humanitarian grounds. Interestingly, convergence of interests and professed humanitarian concerns had also been significant factors influencing a number of past US decisions on military intervention: Somalia in 1993, Kosovo in 1999, and, to a certain extent, even Afghanistan in the 1980s. Given such similarities, we can ascertain that the Obama administration's response to the 2011 Libyan uprising showed clear elements of continuity with previous US foreign policies.

## Syria: the Risks of Change

### US-Syrian Relations prior to 2011

Two characteristics of the Syrian Arab Republic are especially important to understand the complex dynamics of the 2011 popular uprising. The first is Syria's strategic location in the heart of the Greater Middle East. Syria shares borders with Turkey in the north, Iraq in the east, Jordan in the south, and Israel and Lebanon in the west. The second is Syria's heterogeneous society. Religiously, the majority of Syrians are Sunni Muslims (over 70 percent), but there are also followers of three smaller Muslim sects, such as Alawites (over 10 percent), Druzes, and Ismailis, as well as several Christian denominations. Ethnically, roughly 90 percent of Syrians are Arabs, with Kurds representing the largest ethno-linguistic minority (from 7 to 10 percent).<sup>321</sup>

After obtaining independence from France in 1946, Syria experienced decades of chronic political instability punctuated by frequent military coups. In 1970, the rise to power of a strongman, Hafez al Assad, eventually brought stability to Syria. However, stability in the country came at the price of the establishment of a full-fledged police state and the violent repression of any meaningful form of organized domestic opposition. Hafez's iron-fist rule lasted until his death in 2000, when power was passed to one of his sons, Bashar. Soon after taking office, young and Western-educated Bashar al Assad promised a program of economic and political reforms and, for a time, the Syrian regime seemed sincerely willing to tolerate some level of free expression. The so-called Damascus Spring did not last long. Bashar al Assad's promotion of market-oriented economic reforms was not followed by any actual, significant reform of the Syrian political system. Even economic measures, such as privatizations of state-owned assets, did not lead to a sound market economy but, rather, to crony capitalism that, in turn, disproportionately benefited those individuals and entities closely linked to the regime. In addition, President Assad's limited initial opening to dissent proved ephemeral as it was quickly replaced by a new era of violent repression against opposition.<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> Thomas Pickering and others, "Syria Supplemental," *Prism* 4 (2014); Jeremy Sharp, *Syria: Issues for the 112th Congress and Background on U.S. Sanctions 21/12/2010* (Congressional Research Service, December 21, 2010), <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/154165.pdf>; Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook."

<sup>322</sup> Michael S. Doran and Salman Shaikh, "The Ghosts of Hama," in *The Arab Awakening* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011); Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*; MEMRI, *Bashar Assad Teaches Visiting Members of U.S. Congress How to Fight Terrorism* (The Middle East Media Research Institute, January 16, 2002), <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/590.htm>; Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011); Moshe Ma'oz,

Even before the 2011 uprising, Syria was a highly problematic country for the United States. In fact, Syrian policies directly ran against three core US strategic interests in the Greater Middle East: countering terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), ensuring the security of Israel, and containing regional hostile powers.

The United States classified Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism in 1979. The Assad regime long supported a number of US State Department-designated foreign terrorist organizations, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Palestinian groups Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command. By the end of 2010, these groups had offices in Damascus and were free to operate within Syria's borders.<sup>323</sup> US-Syrian positions were also profoundly at odds on the issue of nonproliferation of WMDs. According to US sources, the Syrian regime started a chemical weapons program decades ago, perhaps as early as in the 1970s. In addition, the United States repeatedly accused Syria of pursuing a secret program to develop nuclear weapons in the remote desert facility of Dair Alzour.<sup>324</sup>

Moreover, Syria represented both a direct and indirect threat to the security of Israel. Directly, the Syrian military engaged in several armed conflicts against Israel, and, as a consequence of numerous failed peace negotiations, the two countries in 2011 were technically still in a state of war.<sup>325</sup> Indirectly, the Syrian regime threatened the security of Israel by providing political and material support to openly anti-Israel organizations, such as Hezbollah and Hamas. US policies were aimed at avoiding the resumption of a direct Syrian-Israeli armed confrontation and at limiting

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*Modern Syria: From Ottoman Rule to Pivotal Role in the Middle East* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999); Roger Owen, *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>323</sup> The leadership of Hamas eventually broke its relationship with the Assad regime in February 2012 to fully back the Syrian uprising. See: Omar Fahmy and Nidal Al Mughrabi, "Hamas Ditches Assad, Backs Syrian Revolt," *Reuters*, February 24, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/24/us-syria-palestinians-idUSTRE81N1CC20120224>.

<sup>324</sup> The White House, "Fact Sheet on Syria," August 18, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/fact-sheet-syria>; US Department of State, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations"; Beth Nikitin, Paul Kerr, and Andrew Feickert, *Syria's Chemical Weapons: Issues for Congress* (Congressional Research Service, September 30, 2013), <http://fas.org/srg/crs/nuke/R42848.pdf>; Glyn Davies, "IAEA Board of Governors Meeting, September 13-17, 2010" (United States Mission to the International Organizations in Vienna, September 16, 2010), <http://vienna.usmission.gov/100916inc.html>.

<sup>325</sup> At the time of this writing, Israel still occupies the Golan Heights, about 450 miles of Syrian territory that the Israeli military seized during the 1967 war.

Syria's ability to wage low-intensity warfare against Israel through its Lebanese and Palestinian proxies.<sup>326</sup>

Finally, the Assad regime had developed a close association with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The countries of Syria and Iran not only had cultural and religious affinities, but their leaderships also shared a common hostility against the United States, Israel, and pro-West Arab regimes. The Syrian-Iranian alliance represented a serious obstacle for the US regional policy of containment. In fact, Syria's strategic location and the Assad regime's connection to Hamas and Hezbollah effectively provided Iran with the means to extend its influence from the Persian Gulf, through the Levant, and to the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>327</sup>

Over time, in response to antagonistic Syrian policies, the United States imposed several unilateral sanctions that prohibited US foreign assistance to Syria and significantly restricted bilateral trade. During the presidency of George W. Bush, US-Syrian relations deteriorated further. The two governments repeatedly clashed over a number of issues including the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the ensuing Syrian backing of Iraqi insurgent groups, and the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. The latter episode led the United States to the decision to indefinitely recall its ambassador to Damascus.<sup>328</sup>

This was the particularly tense bilateral relationship that US President Barack Obama inherited when he took office in 2009. On the one hand, the new US administration maintained the unilateral sanctions against Syria and, as showed in its Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations for fiscal year 2010, continued to consider the Assad regime a serious threat both to the United States and to Syria's neighbors. On the other hand, the Obama administration embarked in an attempt to engage with the Syrian leadership "to find areas of mutual interest, reduce regional tensions, and promote Middle East peace." As part of this engagement attempt, delegations of senior US officials and lawmakers (including Special Envoy for Middle East Peace George Mitchell and Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee John Kerry) often traveled to Syria for high-level meetings. Moreover, in January 2011, President Obama restored the position of US

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<sup>326</sup> Sharp, *Syria: Issues for the 112th Congress and Background on U.S. Sanctions 21/12/2010*; Muasher Marwan, former foreign minister (2002–2004) and deputy prime minister (2004–2005) of Jordan Interview, interview by Eugenio Lilli, January 18, 2013.

<sup>327</sup> Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*; Newton David, former US Ambassador to Yemen (1994–1997) and Iraq (1984–1988) Interview, interview by Eugenio Lilli, January 14, 2013.

<sup>328</sup> US Department of State, "Syria Sanctions," accessed September 12, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/syria/>; US Department of State, "U.S. Relations With Syria," accessed September 11, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm>; Richard Boucher, "U.S. Recalls Ambassador to Syria" (US Department of State, February 15, 2005), <http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/42305.htm>.

ambassador to Syria by appointing Robert Ford to the post. Nevertheless, during 2009-10, the US policy of engagement did not lead to any significant advancement in the Arab-Israeli peace process, did not convince Syria to stop sponsoring US-designated terrorist organizations, and did not weaken Syria's alliance with Iran. As a result, the Obama administration grew increasingly frustrated with the regime of President Assad. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton publicly conveyed US frustration in a November 2010 interview. When asked where the policy of engaging Syria was heading, Secretary Clinton replied: "Syria's behavior has not met our hopes and expectations over the past 20 months –and Syria's actions have not met its international obligations. Syria can still choose another path and we hope that it does." On the eve of the 2011 uprising, the Obama administration's policy of engagement with Syria had lost much of its initial momentum.<sup>329</sup>

### **The Syrian Uprising and US Response**

The Syrian uprising began in mid-March 2011. On March 18, the first major demonstrations took place in a number of cities across the country. Although, these early protests were sparked by specific local grievances (as for example, the arrest in the city of Daraa of a dozen teenagers accused of scrawling anti-Assad regime graffiti), demonstrators soon turned their attention to wider national issues: more freedom and democracy, better living conditions, and an end to the government's corruption and unaccountability. Like in other Middle Eastern countries experiencing turmoil in 2011, the uprising in Syria started as a spontaneous popular movement characterized by a very loose structure and the absence of a well-defined leadership. At this early stage, a particularly relevant organizational role was played by internet-savvy youth and human rights groups.<sup>330</sup>

The Syrian regime offered a significantly different account of the uprising. State-controlled news outlets cast the protests alternatively as the work of Islamist extremists, armed gangs, or foreign agents. Such a narrative was used by the regime as a justification for its violent response to what, in

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<sup>329</sup> US Department of State, "U.S. Relations With Syria"; Jeremy Sharp, "Syria: Issues for the 112th Congress and Background on U.S. Sanctions 28/04/2011" (Congressional Research Service, April 28, 2011), <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/162748.pdf>; US Department of State, "Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations FY2010, Volume II"; John Kerry, "Statement of Senator John Kerry Following His Meeting with President Al-Assad in Damascus" (US Embassy in Damascus, April 1, 2010), <http://photos.state.gov/libraries/syria/328666/press2010/kerry-eng.pdf>; Hillary Clinton, "Interview With Hisham Melhem of An-Nahar" (US Department of State, November 10, 2010), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/11/150842.htm>.

<sup>330</sup> Rania Abouzeid, "Two Years Later: What the Syrian War Looks Like," *The New Yorker*, March 14, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2013/03/two-years-later-what-the-syrian-war-looks-like.html>; Al Jazeera, "Violence Erupts at Protests in Syria," March 18, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/03/201131817214964640.html>; Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*.

fact, were mostly peaceful demonstrations. By the end of the first day of protests, at least six people had been killed, hundreds injured, and many others arrested. However, if the use of violence was meant to stop demonstrators from taking to the streets, it failed. On the contrary, the brutality of the regime's response had the opposite effect of fueling wider popular rage. Protests continued unabated and demonstrators raised their demands, with calls for the overthrow of the regime becoming increasingly frequent.<sup>331</sup>

US officials at the State and Defense departments immediately condemned the use of lethal force by Syrian authorities. The State Department, in particular, called on the Syrian regime to exercise restraint and refrain from violence against peaceful demonstrators. Words of strong condemnation came also from the White House. Amidst continuing unrest, US President Obama defined the use of force by the Assad regime as "outrageous". The US president noted that his administration had repeatedly encouraged President Assad "to implement meaningful reforms" but that the Syrian president had instead "chosen the path of repression."<sup>332</sup>

Faced with mounting opposition, President Assad began to offer some concessions, mostly symbolic gestures aimed at defusing the crisis. Nevertheless, these concessions went hand in hand with the uninterrupted use of lethal force and mass arrests by state security forces. In April, the Syrian regime also increased its reliance on the military to maintain control over the country. The Syrian armed forces proved to be especially loyal to the Assad regime. The Syrian president was a member of the Alawite minority, like most of the career soldiers and military officers. Moreover, the military's most elite unit, the Republican Guard, was an all-Alawite force. In addition, the military's top-ranks were permeated by President Assad's family members. Given such a

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<sup>331</sup> International Crisis Group, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (vii): The Syrian Regime's Slow-Motion Suicide*, July 13, 2011, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/109%20Popular%20Protest%20in%20North%20Africa%20and%20the%20Middle%20East%20VII%20--%20The%20Syrian%20Regimes%20Slow-motion%20Suicide.pdf>; The New York Times, "In Syria, Crackdown After Protests," March 18, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/19/world/middleeast/19syria.html?\\_r=2&ref=syria&](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/19/world/middleeast/19syria.html?_r=2&ref=syria&); The New York Times, "Officers Fire on Crowd as Syrian Protests Grow," March 20, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/21/world/middleeast/21syria.html?ref=syria&gwh=94F6AC94E50F980FDA60BACE2715378E&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/21/world/middleeast/21syria.html?ref=syria&gwh=94F6AC94E50F980FDA60BACE2715378E&_r=1&); Michael Slackman, "Syrian Troops Open Fire on Protesters in Several Cities," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/26/world/middleeast/26syria.html?pagewanted=1&ref=syria>.

<sup>332</sup> Robert Gates, "Joint Press Conference with Secretary Gates and Minister Barak from Tel Aviv, Israel" (US Department of Defense, March 24, 2011), <http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4797>; Mark C. Toner, "Daily Press Briefing 21/03/2011" (US Department of State, March 21, 2011), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2011/03/158742.htm#SYRIA>; Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on Syria 22/04/2011" (The White House, April 22, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/04/22/statement-president-syria>.

composition of the armed forces, Syrian military officers were unlikely to turn on the president since they saw their fates as inextricably linked to the survival of the regime.<sup>333</sup>

Meanwhile, the many diverse groups challenging the Assad regime tried to organize themselves into a more structured opposition. Domestically, the Syrian opposition formed small local committees in towns and cities across the country. In order to increase coordination among themselves, such committees united under the banner of the Local Coordinating Committees of Syria (LCC). Externally, Syrian expatriates, Islamists, liberals, representatives of the LCC, youth and human rights activists, tribal leaders, and Kurdish factions had been meeting outside of Syria at least since May in an attempt to coalesce around a unified leadership. After several inconclusive meetings, and after overcoming the many differences among its heterogeneous membership, on 3 October 2011, the opposition eventually announced the official formation of the Syrian National Council (SNC). Despite the SNC's purported broad-based nature, some Syrian minority groups, such as Alawites, Shiites, Druzes, and Christians were poorly represented. Furthermore, at the end of July, a number of Syrian officers defected and announced the creation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), thereby providing the anti-Assad opposition with its own military wing. The FSA, however, never evolved into a unified military force with an effective command-and-control structure. Instead, the FSA mostly remained an umbrella organization for an array of anti-regime armed groups operating in a largely autonomous fashion.<sup>334</sup>

The above description has to be considered a simplification of an otherwise much more complex and continuously evolving situation. Although the LCC, the SNC, and the FSA gained some preeminence within the Syrian opposition, other political and military groups were also challenging the Assad regime. Given the large number of distinct actors involved and the absence of clear

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<sup>333</sup> Michael Slackman and Liam Stack, "Tension and Grief in Syria After Protests and Deadly Reprisals," *The New York Times*, March 26, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/27/world/middleeast/27syria.html?pagewanted=1&ref=syria>; Michael Slackman, "Syria's Cabinet Resigns; Concessions Expected," *The New York Times*, March 29, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/30/world/middleeast/30syria.html?ref=syria>; David W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2012); Reuters, "Factbox-Syria's Military: What Does Assad Have?," April 6, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/06/syria-military-idAFLDE72S19O20110406>; Reva Bhalla, "Making Sense of the Syrian Crisis," *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, May 5, 2011, [http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110504-making-sense-syrian-crisis?utm\\_source=GWeekly&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=110505&utm\\_content=readmore&elq=2ef73758a9434404bd465acd3490d5fe#ixzz1LTPFUuuw](http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110504-making-sense-syrian-crisis?utm_source=GWeekly&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=110505&utm_content=readmore&elq=2ef73758a9434404bd465acd3490d5fe#ixzz1LTPFUuuw).

<sup>334</sup> Local Coordinating Committees, "About the LCCs," *Local Coordinating Committees of Syria*, accessed July 10, 2013, <http://www.lccsyria.org/about>; Suleiman Al Khalidi and Simon Cameron-Moore, "Syria Opposition Group Form Council to Counter Assad," *Reuters*, July 16, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/07/16/us-syria-opposition-council-idUSTRE76F1W320110716>; The Associated Press, "Anti-Assad Dissidents Form Syrian National Council," *The New York Times*, October 3, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/03/world/middleeast/anti-assad-dissidents-form-syrian-national-council.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/03/world/middleeast/anti-assad-dissidents-form-syrian-national-council.html?_r=1&); Asharq Al-Awasat, "Syrian Army Colonel Defects Forms Free Syrian Army," August 1, 2011, <http://www.aawsat.net/2011/08/article55245595>; FRONTLINE, *Q&A: A Closer Look at Syria's Fragmented Opposition* (PBS, November 10, 2011), <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/foreign-affairs-defense/syria-undercover/a-closer-look-at-syrias-fragmented-opposition/>.

hierarchical relations among them, no single entity acquired the legitimacy necessary to speak as the sole and consensus representative of the Syrian opposition. Such a fragmentation and lack of coordination would prove especially damaging to the opposition's efforts to win both domestic and international support.<sup>335</sup>

The Obama administration coupled its rhetorical support for the Syrian uprising with a strategy of progressive targeted sanctions against the Assad regime. In April, President Obama renewed the Syria National Emergency Act, essentially prolonging the effect of sanctions that had been in place since 2004. After that, the White House extended the scope of the Syria National Emergency Act by issuing Executive Order 13572, which levied sanctions on people and entities close to President Assad. Finally, in May, President Obama issued Executive Order 13573 imposing additional sanctions on senior members of the regime, including the Syrian president. Notably, it was the first time, since the beginning of the uprising, that the US administration had imposed a set of sanctions that directly penalized President Assad.<sup>336</sup>

During May/June 2011, US officials also sharpened their rhetorical criticism of the Syrian regime. President Obama firmly denounced the Assad regime's decision of resorting to repression to remain in power. Obama stated that President Assad had still a choice: to "lead the transition" to a freer and more democratic Syria or to "get out of the way". US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates defined the violence unleashed by the Syrian regime as a "slaughter of innocent lives". Secretary Gates added that "whether Assad still has the legitimacy to govern in his own country after this kind of a slaughter I think is a question that everybody needs to consider." In even stronger terms, Secretary of State Clinton warned, "The legitimacy that is necessary for anyone to expect change to occur

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<sup>335</sup> International Crisis Group, *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, Middle East Report, October 12, 2012, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition.pdf>; FRONTLINE, *Syria: The Crisis, The Rebels & The Endgame* (PBS, September 18, 2012), <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/foreign-affairs-defense/battle-for-syria/syria-the-crisis-the-rebels-the-endgame/>.

<sup>336</sup> Barack Obama, "Message and Notice from the President on the Continuation of the National Emergency with Respect to Syria" (The White House, April 29, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/04/29/message-and-notice-president-continuation-national-emergency-respect-syr>; Barack Obama, "Executive Order 13572 --Blocking Property of Certain Persons with Respect to Human Rights Abuses in Syria" (The White House, April 29, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/04/29/executive-order-blocking-property-certain-persons-respect-human-rights-a>; Barack Obama, "Executive Order 13573--Blocking Property of Senior Officials of the Government of Syria" (The White House, May 18, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/18/executive-order-blocking-property-senior-officials-government-syria>; The White House, "Fact Sheet on Syria," August 18, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/fact-sheet-syria>.



under this current government is, if not gone, nearly run out.” The public rhetoric adopted by the administration officials suggested that US patience with President Assad was wearing thin.<sup>337</sup>

Despite a harsher rhetoric, new sanctions specifically targeting the Syrian president, and continued violence that had resulted into more than 900 uprising-related deaths, the Obama administration stopped short of calling on President Assad to resign. They further did not explicitly declare that the Syrian president had lost legitimacy to lead his country. The US administration’s hesitation in holding President Assad personally responsible for the “brutal crackdown” on the opposition received criticism from the US Congress. In fact, at least since early May, several US lawmakers had been saying that the Syrian president had “lost legitimacy” and had been asking Assad “to step down”.<sup>338</sup>

On July 7, in a show of solidarity with the residents, US Ambassador to Syria Ford visited the city of Hama, one of the focal points of the Syrian uprising. Following Ambassador Ford’s visit, pro-Assad supporters attacked and vandalized the US embassy and the ambassador’s own residence in Damascus. The Obama administration immediately condemned the attack. In a marked shift from previous US administration’s comments, Secretary of State Clinton said:

*“If anyone, including President Assad, thinks that the United States is secretly hoping that the regime will emerge from this turmoil to continue its brutality and repression, they are wrong [...] President Assad is not indispensable and we have absolutely nothing invested in him remaining in power.”*<sup>339</sup>

Pressed to explain further, Secretary Clinton added: “from our perspective, he [Assad] has lost legitimacy.” Likewise, although in a less assertive tone (perhaps indicating the existence of divergent opinions within the administration), President Obama echoed Clinton’s message: “[Assad] has missed opportunity after opportunity to present a genuine reform agenda [...] You are seeing President Assad lose legitimacy in the eyes of his people.” In describing such an important

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<sup>337</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa”; Robert Gates, “Remarks by Secretary Gates at the Security and Defense Agenda, Brussels, Belgium 10/06/2011” (US Department of Defense, June 10, 2011), <http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4839>; Arshad Mohammed and Andrew Quinn, “Clinton Suggests Assad Legitimacy ‘Nearly Run Out,’” *Reuters*, June 2, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/06/02/us-syria-clinton-idUSTRE7514K320110602>.

<sup>338</sup> On the position of the US Congress see for example: US House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, “Shifting Sands: Political Transitions in the Middle East, Part 2” (US Congress, May 5, 2011), <http://archives.republicans.foreignaffairs.house.gov/112/66173.pdf>; US Congress, “S. Res. 180 - Expressing Support for Peaceful Demonstrations and Universal Freedoms in Syria and Condemning the Human Rights Violations by the Assad Regime,” May 11, 2011.

<sup>339</sup> Hillary Clinton, “Remarks With European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton After Their Meeting” (US Department of State, July 11, 2011), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/07/168027.htm>.

shift in the administration's policy toward the Syrian uprising, US officials stated that it was not a direct consequence of the embassy attack. They insisted, instead, that a change of policy had been weeks in the making.<sup>340</sup>

Eventually, it took another month of the Syrian regime's empty promises of compromise, accompanied by continued repressive measures against the opposition, for the Obama administration to unequivocally demand President Assad's resignation. President Obama explained the decision as follows:

*"The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al Assad is standing in their way. His calls for dialogue and reform have rung hollow while he is imprisoning, torturing, and slaughtering his own people. We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside."*<sup>341</sup>

In order to further disrupt the Assad regime's "ability to finance a campaign of violence against the Syrian people", President Obama signed Executive Order 13582. This last Executive Order froze all assets of the government of Syria under US jurisdiction, prohibited US subjects from engaging in any transaction involving the government of Syria, banned US imports of Syrian petroleum or petroleum products, prohibited US subjects from having any dealings in or related to Syria's petroleum or petroleum products, and prohibited US subjects from operating or investing in Syria.<sup>342</sup>

The US president also pointed out:

*"The United States cannot and will not impose this transition upon Syria. It is up to the Syrian people to choose their own leaders, and we have heard their strong desire that there*

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<sup>340</sup> BBC, "Syria: Assad Supporters Attack Us and French Embassies," July 11, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14111198>; Clinton, "Remarks With European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton After Their Meeting"; Joby Warrick and Mary Beth Sheridan, "Impromptu Words, Actions Drive U.S. Stance on Syria," *The Washington Post*, July 17, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/impromptu-words-actions-drive-us-stance-on-syria/2011/07/15/gIQAhMelII\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/impromptu-words-actions-drive-us-stance-on-syria/2011/07/15/gIQAhMelII_story.html); Mark Landler and David E. Sanger, "White House, in Shift, Turns Against Syria Leader," *The New York Times*, July 12, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/13/world/middleeast/13policy.html?ref=syria>.

<sup>341</sup> Barack Obama, "Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria 18/08/2011" (The White House, August 18, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria>.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid.; Barack Obama, "Executive Order 13582 -- Blocking Property of the Government of Syria and Prohibiting Certain Transactions with Respect to Syria" (The White House, August 17, 2011), <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2011-08-22/pdf/2011-21505.pdf>.

*not be foreign intervention in their movement [...] We will support this outcome by pressuring President Assad to get out of the way of this transition.*”<sup>343</sup>

Detected in Obama's words is the US president's early reluctance to get the United States involved in another Libya-style intervention.

The Assad regime represented a bridgehead for the Islamic Republic of Iran to spread its influence across the Greater Middle East. Syria also sheltered and sponsored militant organizations, such as Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas, openly hostile to the United States and its local ally Israel. Moreover, Damascus possessed chemical weapons and allegedly pursued programs for the production of nuclear ones. Finally, since March 2011, President Assad had overseen a brutal crackdown on mostly peaceful demonstrators whose demands were about freedom, democracy, and better living conditions. All of this seemed to create a clear convergence between US strategic interests and US ideal interests. In fact, the removal of President Assad would presumably increase Iran's isolation in the Greater Middle East, weaken US-designated terrorist organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas, and serve US non-proliferation policy while, at the same time, promote values and principles dear to the United States. Therefore, it is not immediately obvious why it took four long months for the Obama administration to say that President Assad had lost legitimacy and an extra month to finally call on the Syrian president to step aside.<sup>344</sup>

At this point, a deeper analysis of the US national interests at stake in Syria is necessary to understand the Obama administration's hesitant policy toward the uprising.

A first reason behind the US belated demand for Assad's resignation was that a significant number of administration officials and US lawmakers had the perception that the Syrian president was a potential reformer. They believed that, if given enough time and some political space, young Western-educated Assad, who came to power with a reformist agenda in 2000, would in fact implement the social, political, and economic reforms demanded by the Syrian protesters. Moreover, the Obama administration had not completely given up on the possibility that the US policy of engagement with the Assad regime could succeed in drawing Syria away from Iran's orbit and convince President Assad to play a constructive role in the Arab-Israeli peace process. However, as time passed, punctuated by Assad's broken promises of reform and continued regime-sanctioned violent repression, more people in Washington became disillusioned with the idea that

<sup>343</sup> Obama, “Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria 18/08/2011.”

<sup>344</sup> Mark Landler, “Unrest in Syria and Jordan Poses New Test for U.S. Policy,” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/27/world/middleeast/27diplomacy.html?ref=syria&gwh=A19438A5080C86FBD18EE29781A7E09B&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/27/world/middleeast/27diplomacy.html?ref=syria&gwh=A19438A5080C86FBD18EE29781A7E09B&_r=1&).

the Syrian president was a reformer and that he could be a force for peace in the region. With regard to this, we can identify three broad positions within the US executive. First, the White House seemed reluctant to openly pursue a policy of seeking Assad's removal. This was perhaps because President Obama had personally invested political capital in his administration's early attempt to engage with the Syrian leadership. Second, the US State Department took a more activist approach. Secretary Clinton and Ambassador Ford, in particular, became strong advocates for a more assertive US policy in Syria. Third, the US Defense Department adopted a somewhat neutral stance and usually deferred to the other two institutions' decisions. Pentagon officials, in fact, were fully absorbed in dealing with the contemporaneous US participation in military operations in Libya.<sup>345</sup>

Along with different perceptions about the personality of President Assad, US hesitation in calling for the Syrian president's resignation depended also on geo-political and strategic considerations. To begin with, the Assad regime had long succeeded in keeping religiously and ethnically divided Syria from plunging into chaos and sectarian conflict. US officials were genuinely worried that a security vacuum would emerge from a sudden and "disorderly" power transition in the country. The United States was especially concerned about the possibility that Islamists or Iran would fill such a vacuum. Chaos and sectarian conflict originating from the fall of the Assad regime could also dangerously spread to Syria's neighbors thus destabilizing an already volatile yet strategically important region. Secondly, the Obama administration saw the end of the Assad regime in light of Israel's security. The rule of President Assad, in fact, had guaranteed a certain level of stability on the Syrian-Israeli border for years. Despite Syria's open support for anti-Israel militant organizations, the Syrian president had developed a live-and-let-live relationship with Israel. Israeli officials were familiar with their Syrian counterparts, whereas they feared what might replace them.<sup>346</sup> US and Israeli fears seemed to be validated on 5 June 2011 when pro-Palestinian demonstrators, commemorating the anniversary of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, tried to breach the border into the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, triggering an armed response by the Israeli defense forces. Analysts argued that demonstrators could not have reached the border without at least the Syrian government's acquiescence, and someone also speculated that President Assad had

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<sup>345</sup> US House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, "Assessing U.S. Foreign Policy Priorities and Needs Amidst Economic Challenges in the Middle East" (US Congress, March 10, 2011), <http://archives.republicans.foreignaffairs.house.gov/112/65055.pdf>; Hillary Clinton, "Interview With Bob Schieffer of CBS's Face the Nation" (US Department of State, March 27, 2011), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/03/159210.htm>; Edward Djerejian, The U.S. Role in a Changing Mideast, interview by Bernard Gwertzman, August 17, 2012, <http://www.cfr.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/us-role-changing-mideast/p28834>; Warrick and Sheridan, "Impromptu Words, Actions Drive U.S. Stance on Syria"; Muasher Marwan, former foreign minister (2002–2004) and deputy prime minister (2004–2005) of Jordan Interview.

<sup>346</sup> Tellingly, Israel publicly called for President Assad's resignation only in September 2013. See: Dan Williams, "In Public Shift, Israel Calls for Assad's Fall," *Reuters*, September 17, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/17/us-syria-crisis-israel-idUSBRE98G0DR20130917>.

deliberately allowed the incident to happen in order to show the regional security implications of the fall of his regime. Thirdly, some observers argued that the Obama administration's hesitation in committing the United States to a policy of openly seeking Assad's resignation was part of the broader US strategy to address the uprising. According to this view, the Obama administration worried that too forceful a US pro-uprising stance too early might have been interpreted by Syrians as foreign meddling in their domestic affairs and, therefore, led to a nationalist rejection of the protests.<sup>347</sup>

All that considered, the Obama administration's task of framing a policy response to the Syrian uprising was much more complex than a limited analysis of the US national interest might have otherwise revealed. A clear convergence between ideal and strategic US interests could not be taken for granted. Important US strategic interests, in fact, conflicted with a policy aimed at the overthrow of the Syrian president. Individual perceptions of Assad's personality, divergent assessments of the Syrian regime's stabilizing role in the region, and a cautious US strategy accounted for the US hesitation in fully supporting the Syrian opposition. Only when developments in Syria showed that President Assad was unable to contain the unrest, and that the regime's violent repression was directly contributing to increased regional instability, the Obama administration came to the conclusion that US interests would be best served by joining the Syrian opposition's call for Assad to step aside.

After President Obama publicly called on his Syrian counterpart to resign in August, the US administration consistently relied on diplomacy as its preferred tool to achieve regime change. US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman explained that the Obama administration did not "seek further militarization" in Syria, but it was instead working with US

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<sup>347</sup> Jeremy Sharp and Christopher M. Blanchard, *Armed Conflict in Syria: U.S. and International Response* (Congressional Research Service, August 21, 2012), <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/198098.pdf>; Dibble Elizabeth, US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Interview; Newton David, former US Ambassador to Yemen (1994-1997) and Iraq (1984-1988) Interview; Yacoubian Mona, North Africa analyst at the US Department of State (1990-1997) Interview, interview by Eugenio Lilli, February 5, 2013; Aftandilian Gregory, Center for National Policy Interview, interview by Eugenio Lilli, January 17, 2013; Isabel Kershner, "Protests Draw Israeli Gunfire at Syria Border," *The New York Times*, June 6, 2011, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F00E2D6143FF935A35755C0A9679D8B63&ref=syria>; Carothers, *Democracy Policy under Obama: Revitalization or Retreat?*; Nabeel A. Khoury, "Syria's Assad: Still the Wrong Choice," *The Los Angeles Times*, January 7, 2014, [http://www.latimes.com/opinion/commentary/la-oe-khoury-beirut-assad-crocker-20140107,0,988799.story?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=\\*Mideast%20Brief&utm\\_campaign=Mideast%20Brief%201-8-2014#axzz2peVPZzsc](http://www.latimes.com/opinion/commentary/la-oe-khoury-beirut-assad-crocker-20140107,0,988799.story?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=*Mideast%20Brief&utm_campaign=Mideast%20Brief%201-8-2014#axzz2peVPZzsc); Clive Jones and Beverly Milton Edwards, "Missing the 'devils' We Knew? Israel and Political Islam Amid the Arab Awakening," *International Affairs* 89, no. II (2013); Michael Hirsh, "The Clinton Legacy How Will History Judge the Soft-Power Secretary of State?," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. III (June 2013).

international partners “to further isolate and pressure the regime through diplomatic and financial means.” Similarly, President Obama conveyed his administration’s commitment “to create the kind of international pressure and environment that encourages the current Syrian regime to step aside so that a more democratic process of transition can take place inside of Syria.” US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta<sup>348</sup> also reaffirmed the US administration’s preference for diplomacy: “Although we will not rule out any future course of action, currently the administration is focusing on diplomatic and political approaches rather than a military intervention.”<sup>349</sup>

Accordingly, the United States put its weight behind the Arab League’s and the United Nations’ successive initiatives to find a diplomatic solution to the Syrian crisis. Moreover, the Obama administration sponsored the formation of the Friends of Syria Group. Such a group represented an additional forum where countries sympathetic to the Syrian uprising coordinated their collective actions in support of the anti-Assad opposition. However, US efforts to bring meaningful diplomatic pressure to bear on the Syrian regime clashed with the reality of an international community deeply divided on the issue of Syria. Throughout the crisis, the Islamic Republic of Iran stood firmly with President Assad. At the United Nations, Russia and China repeatedly blocked any UN Security Council resolution condemning the Syrian regime with their veto power. Russia and China did not want a repetition of a Libya-style intervention, where, according to these two countries, a UN mandate intended to protect civilians had instead become a license to pursue regime change. The Arab League was also divided. Sunni Gulf states perceived the Assad regime as a proxy of Shiite Iran and, therefore, were more inclined to support the Syrian opposition. Other Arab governments, like those of Iraq and Lebanon (incidentally both Syria’s neighbors) were more reluctant to side against the Assad regime fearing destabilizing repercussions for their countries. This lack of international consensus on Syria significantly weakened the ability of the United States to diplomatically isolate the Assad regime.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> Leon Panetta replaced Robert Gates as head of the US Department of Defense in July 2011.

<sup>349</sup> Jeffrey Feltman, “Written Statement Jeffrey D. Feltman, US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs” (US Senate Committee On Foreign Relations, November 9, 2011), [http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Jeffrey\\_Feltman\\_Revised.pdf](http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Jeffrey_Feltman_Revised.pdf); Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama and His Majesty King Abdullah of Jordan 17/01/2012” (The White House, January 17, 2012), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/17/remarks-president-obama-and-his-majesty-king-abdullah-jordan>; Leon Panetta, “US Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta Submitted Statement on Syria Senate Armed Services Committee” (US Senate Armed Forces Committee, March 7, 2012), <http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Panetta%2003-07-121.pdf>.

<sup>350</sup> Sharp and Blanchard, *Armed Conflict in Syria: U.S. and International Response*; Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*; Jonathan D. Pollack, “China: Unease from Afar,” in *The Arab Awakening* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011); Pavel K. Baev, “Russia: Moscow Does Not Believe in Change,” in *The Arab Awakening* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011); Katzman, *Bahrain: Reform*,

Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation in Syria was rapidly worsening. By the end of summer 2012, between 17,000 and 23,000 people had died in uprising-related incidents. Approximately 234,000 refugees had registered for UN support. Tens of thousands of refugees more were thought to have left Syria without registering. Roughly 2.5 million people needed assistance inside the country. More than 1.2 million others were internally displaced. The security picture did not look bright either. In mid-July, due to the remarkable escalation of violence documented in Syria, the International Committee of the Red Cross officially classified the crisis as a full-fledged civil war. By then, what began as a peaceful and national protest movement had turned into a sectarian armed conflict mostly pitting the Sunni majority of the populace against President Assad's Alawite sect. As evidence of the brutality of the conflict, the UN Human Rights Council reported that both regime loyalists and opposition fighters were responsible for atrocities and abuses committed against both combatants and civilians. Finally, sectarian tensions threatened to spill over into Syria's neighbors, thus rising the specter of a regional conflict.<sup>351</sup>

The deteriorating humanitarian and security situations, coupled with the patent failure of diplomacy to bring about regime change, prompted senior officials within the Obama administration to advocate for a more assertive US policy toward Syria. In summer 2012, State Secretary Clinton and CIA Director David Petraeus prepared a plan for arming the Syrian opposition. The Clinton-Petraeus proposal called for carefully vetting the anti-Assad opposition and training selected groups of fighters, who would be supplied with weapons. The idea was to create allies in Syria with whom the United States could work, both during the crisis and after President Assad's eventual removal. This position was also supported by Defense Secretary Panetta and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey.<sup>352</sup> Despite the seniority of the officials sponsoring the plan, the White House decided to reject their proposal. Since the beginning of the uprising, President Obama had

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*Security, and U.S. Policy 12/02/2013*; Yacoubian Mona, North Africa analyst at the US Department of State (1990-1997) Interview.

<sup>351</sup> Agence France Presse, "UN's Syria Observer Mission Ends Amid Bloodshed," August 20, 2012, [http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5i\\_tWI9nGVvWs7UEJ-mXfTZA5Kq1g?docId=CNG.eb1fc4aad8c3533e7c222d7f65162f59.4e1&hl=en](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5i_tWI9nGVvWs7UEJ-mXfTZA5Kq1g?docId=CNG.eb1fc4aad8c3533e7c222d7f65162f59.4e1&hl=en); Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic* (UN Human Rights Council, August 15, 2012), <http://www.scribd.com/doc/102985295/A-HRC-21-50>; Navi Pillay, "Ms. Navi Pillay, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Statement to the Side-Event at the 21st Session of the UN Human Rights Council on 'Bearing Witness: Human Rights and Accountability in Syria'" (UN Human Rights Council, September 10, 2012), <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=12491&LangID=E>; David D. Kirkpatrick, Hwaida Saad, and Neil MacFarquhar, "United Nations Says 100,000 Refugees Fled Syria in August," *The New York Times*, September 4, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/05/world/middleeast/syria.html?ref=syria>; Al Jazeera, "Syrian Rebels Lose Key Aleppo District," August 10, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/08/201281051654976892.html>; Stephanie Nebehay, "Exclusive: Red Cross Ruling Raises Questions of Syrian War Crimes," *Reuters*, July 14, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/14/us-syria-crisis-icrc-idUSBRE86D09H20120714>.

<sup>352</sup> Martin Dempsey replaced Michael Mullen as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in October 2011.

consistently expressed his belief that the United States could best protect its national interests by staying out of the Syrian conflict as much as possible. Evidently, by the end of summer 2012, the US president had not changed his mind. Therefore, beyond the diplomatic effort, US policy in Syria continued to be limited to the provision of non-lethal support (i.e. communication gear), humanitarian relief (i.e. medical supplies), and political assistance for the formation of a more united and legitimate opposition.<sup>353</sup>

The White House explained its self-imposed no-arming policy as follows: “We do not believe that militarization, further militarization of the situation in Syria at this point is the right course of action. We believe that it would lead to greater chaos, greater carnage.” While US officials were genuinely concerned about the possibility that an additional influx of weapons into Syria would only worsen the crisis, there was also another paramount reason behind the Obama administration’s refusal to provide lethal aid to the anti-Assad opposition. US officials feared that US weapons could fall into the hands of extremist groups with anti-American agendas, possibly even to Al Qaeda linked groups. In fact, by mid-2012, escalating violence and the failure of the moderate opposition to extract any significant concession from the Assad regime had radicalized the Syrian uprising and increased the popular appeal of extremist factions. An October 2012 report, issued by the think tank International Crisis Group, confirmed that “the presence of a powerful Salafi<sup>354</sup> strand among Syria’s rebels ha[d] become irrefutable.” Islamist militant groups such as Jabhat al Nusra , Ahrar al Sham, and the Islamic Vanguard had become primary actors in the armed struggle against regime’s loyalist forces.<sup>355</sup>

In addition, there were a number of domestic and external factors that limited the ability of the Obama administration to shape events in Syria. A policy of larger US involvement, especially a military involvement like the one in Libya, clashed with domestic constraints. The economic crisis and a shrinking federal budget did not allow for new costly military adventures abroad. The United

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<sup>353</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Mark Landler, “Backstage Glimpses of Clinton as Dogged Diplomat, Win or Lose,” *The New York Times*, February 2, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/us/politics/in-behind-scene-blows-and-triumphs-sense-of-clinton-future.html?pagewanted=1>; Michael R. Gordon and Mark Landler, “Senate Hearing Draws Out a Rift in U.S. Policy on Syria,” *The New York Times*, February 7, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/08/us/politics/panetta-speaks-to-senate-panel-on-benghazi-attack.html?\\_r=2&](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/08/us/politics/panetta-speaks-to-senate-panel-on-benghazi-attack.html?_r=2&); Michele Dunne, “The Costs of U.S Restraint in Syria,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 9, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/06/09/costs-of-u.s.-restraint-in-syria/hd7g>; Hillary Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014); Victoria Nuland, “Daily Press Briefing 13/06/2012” (US Department of State, June 13, 2012), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2012/06/192255.htm#RUSSIA>.

<sup>354</sup> Salafism consists of a strict literal interpretation of Islamic holy scriptures. The term is sometimes used to address very conservative and extremist Islamist groups.

<sup>355</sup> Jay Carney, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 5/29/12” (The White House, May 29, 2012), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/29/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-52912>; Dibble Elizabeth, US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Interview; International Crisis Group, *Tentative Jihad: Syria’s Fundamentalist Opposition*.



States experienced a widespread domestic fatigue with respect to military interventions and nation building operations in yet another Muslim country. As well, political considerations in a presidential election year saw the risky decision of committing US armed forces in a war as potential for losing votes. Moreover, the Obama administration also faced external constraints. Decades of tense US-Syrian relations had led to the absence of any significant commercial, political, or military ties between the two countries, thereby depriving the United States of essential tools to exercise meaningful pressure on the Syrian government.<sup>356</sup> Furthermore, even after almost two years of unrest, the Assad regime continued to enjoy substantial support among different Syrian constituencies. Despite some defections, the Alawite-controlled military mostly remained loyal to the regime. Similarly, the Sunni business and mercantile classes, that became influent under the rule of the Assad family, had a stake in the survival of the Syrian president. Syria's religious and ethnic minority groups also generally sided with the regime out of fear of instability and retribution at the hands of the Sunni majority. Conversely, the anti-Assad opposition repeatedly failed to resolve its internal differences and to present itself to the Syrian people and the international community as a unified and credible organization that would be able to govern in a post-Assad Syria. A final constraint to US action was represented by the lack of international agreement on the best way to resolve the Syrian crisis. The absence of a clear UN mandate made the possibility of any US direct intervention more difficult.<sup>357</sup>

The interplay of these considerations resulted in the Obama administration's hesitant policy of qualified support toward the Syrian uprising. At times, US officials even seemed ambivalent about the desirability of the opposition's victory. In fact, US actions belied the administration's unstated hope that systematic US and international pressures would eventually convince the Syrian regime (with or without President Assad at its helm) to engage in serious negotiations and end the crisis.

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<sup>356</sup> For example, despite the political significance of US additional sanctions, administration officials privately acknowledged that Syria was already under so many sanctions that any new set of US sanctions would have little material effect. See: David E. Sanger, "U.S. Faces a Challenge in Trying to Punish Syria," *The New York Times*, April 25, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/26/world/middleeast/26diplo.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/26/world/middleeast/26diplo.html?_r=1&).

<sup>357</sup> Sharp and Blanchard, *Armed Conflict in Syria: U.S. and International Response*; Doran and Shaikh, "The Ghosts of Hama"; Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); International Crisis Group, *Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria's Dynamics*, Middle East Briefing, November 24, 2011, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/B031%20Uncharted%20Waters%20-%20Thinking%20Through%20Syrias%20Dynamics>; Anne Barnard, "Syrian Rebels Find Hearts and Minds Elusive," *The New York Times*, January 15, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/16/world/middleeast/syrian-opposition-finds-hearts-and-minds-are-elusive.html?ref=syria&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/16/world/middleeast/syrian-opposition-finds-hearts-and-minds-are-elusive.html?ref=syria&_r=0); Panetta, "US Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta Submitted Statement on Syria Senate Armed Services Committee"; Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *Periodic Update 20/12/2012* (Geneva: UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, December 20, 2012), <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SY/ColSyriaDecember2012.pdf>.

## Continuity or Change

At first glance, the Syrian uprising appeared to provide a case of convergence among different US national interests. The ideal interest of supporting demonstrators demanding more freedom, democracy, and better living conditions seemed compatible with the strategic interests of containing Iranian influence, securing Israel, and advancing US counterterrorism and nonproliferation policies. However, our analysis has showed that such a convergence of US interests was not obvious. In fact, US backing of the Syrian opposition's call for Assad's resignation generated concerns within the Obama administration about the negative repercussions that an abrupt end to the Assad regime would have for these same core US strategic interests in the region.

After the outbreak of the uprising, the US administration was quick to offer rhetorical support for the Syrian opposition and to exert economic and diplomatic pressure on the Syrian regime. US officials proved more hesitant, instead, when it came to backing the Syrian opposition's demand for Assad's resignation and to considering plans to expand US participation in the crisis to include military assistance to the armed opposition. Within the US executive branch, administration officials held divergent opinions on such sensitive issues. On the one hand, the White House, and especially President Obama, played a "moderating role" and advocated for a limited and qualified US involvement. On the other hand, the State Department, and to a certain extent also the Defense Department, pushed for a more assertive US policy. In the end, the White House's moderate position emerged as the administration's official position.

In framing its response to the Syrian uprising, the Obama administration was caught between the understanding that Assad rule had become untenable and serious concerns about the uncertainty of what would replace the Syrian regime. Eventually, the administration took the decision to join the Syrian opposition's call for Assad to step aside, but it did so only after US officials concluded that President Assad would be unable to stop the crisis and that continued conflict in Syria was jeopardizing the stability of the wider region. Even after the decision to demand Assad's resignation, the policy of the Obama administration continued to show half-hearted support for the uprising, primarily out of concern about the growing influence of Islamist extremist groups within the ranks of the Syrian armed opposition.

Overall, we can argue that the Obama administration's response to the Syrian uprising represented continuity with the traditional US foreign policy in the Greater Middle East. The United States backed the Syrian uprising only when administration officials determined that US strategic interests had finally aligned with US ideal interests. Moreover, in line with US foreign policy responses to

previous crises in the region, the Obama administration showed a preference for maintaining a familiar, although imperfect, status quo rather than promoting substantial, although uncertain, political change.

## PART FOUR

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## Findings and Implications

### Research Findings

Since World War II, the United States has arguably been the most influential foreign actor in the Greater Middle East. The demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 removed the last biggest constraint to the United States' hold on the region. This dominant position in one of the most strategically important areas of the world gave US policymakers a noticeable edge over their global competitors in order to advance the US national interest. Therefore, it is not surprising that successive US administrations' primary concern in the Greater Middle East has been to maintain their country's influential status. In particular, the United States has always been seriously concerned with any crisis that could substantially alter the existing distribution of power. Over time, US officials came to see the status quo in the region as highly beneficial to the US national interest and any threat to the status quo as correspondingly dangerous. Hence, US involvement in covert actions aimed at reinstating the shah to power in Iran in 1953, US assistance to the insurgency fighting Soviet occupation troops in Afghanistan during the 1980s, and US military intervention in 1991 to repel Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

The interests of the United States in the Greater Middle East are multiple and sometimes conflicting. As a consequence, US presidents have repeatedly found themselves in the difficult position of striking a delicate balance between the pursuit of core strategic national interests (such as access to Middle Eastern energy resources, containment of hostile powers, policies to counter terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the special relationship with Israel) and the promotion of cherished ideal national interests (such as the desire to see a freer and more democratic Greater Middle East). Abundant historical evidence exists to support the argument that US presidents have by and large favored the former set of interests to the detriment of the latter. This has resulted in the traditional US preference for backing autocratic, but friendly, regimes rather than wholeheartedly embracing calls for democratic reform.

Officials in Washington have commonly believed that support for friendly autocratic regimes represented the safest way to maintain US dominant status and protect US strategic interests, at least in the short term. The alternative of embracing democratic reform in the Greater Middle East has been perceived as having two major downsides. First, the fruits of a policy of democracy promotion could be reaped only in the long term; a political prospect that is not particularly appealing to a four

year-term administration. Second, the outcome of a democratic transition will always be uncertain. Who will replace undemocratic but pliant autocrats that have been in power for decades? Will new democratically-elected leaders be as accommodating to US interests as their autocratic predecessors? Especially given the fact that those new leaders will reasonably be more responsive to domestic constituencies openly suspicious of US intentions and policies? Will new democratically-elected leaders actually be committed to continue on the path of democratic reform? There is no doubt that those and similar questions have weighed heavily in the reasoning of the officials responsible for framing US foreign policy.

The above is not to say that the United States has not been an advocate of democratic reform in the Greater Middle East. On the contrary, US administrations have publicly supported democratic reforms for decades both by exerting direct pressure on the regimes and by fostering the development of local civil society. The United States, however, has engaged in democracy promotion in Middle Eastern countries only to the extent that US engagement would not jeopardize the broader bilateral relationships.

The 2011-12 Arab Awakening was an unexpected event that cast serious doubts on the validity of the rationale behind this traditional US foreign policy toward the Greater Middle East. The outbreak of the Awakening showed that autocratic leaders could hardly be considered the best guarantors of stability. Some Middle Eastern leaders were overthrown, others were severely challenged, and all of them were confronted by some level of popular unrest. Long-repressed popular grievances eventually erupted in formidable uprisings that critically shook the foundations of the region's order and added elements of instability and uncertainty that had the potential to threaten core US national interests.

When protesters across the Greater Middle East took to the streets in 2011 demanding democratic reforms and more accountability for their autocratic leaders, President Barack Obama faced one of those situations where a US president has to find a difficult compromise between different US national interests. How, then, did President Obama respond to the transformative events of the Arab Awakening?

On the one end of the spectrum, there are the opinions of skeptical Arab activists that blamed the Obama administration for not going beyond rhetorical support for the pro-democracy protests. On the opposite end, there are irritated Arab regimes that vehemently accused the United States of abandoning longtime allies and recklessly siding with protesters. Opposing interpretations of the US response to the uprising in Egypt were a case in point. Egyptian demonstrators charged the Obama

administration with being too hesitant to embrace the popular protest that eventually overthrew President Hosni Mubarak, whereas Arab leaders, especially in Saudi Arabia, blamed the United States for not defending a longtime ally until the end. Likewise, with regard to the Bahraini uprising, hardliners within the Al Khalifa royal family were profoundly upset by US public criticism of their crackdown on demonstrators, whereas human rights activists condemned what they perceived as a quasi-silent US response to the Bahraini government's repressive policies. Finally, President Obama offered his own interpretation of the events during a 2012 speech at the United Nations General Assembly. According to Obama, the United States was "inspired by the Tunisian protests" that toppled President Ben Ali, "insisted on change" in Egypt, "supported a transition of leadership" in Yemen, intervened in Libya "to stop the slaughter of innocents", and asked for an end to the regime of President Bashar al Assad "so that the suffering of the Syrian people can stop". Notably, President Obama's remarks conveniently omitted any reference to the US response to the uprising in Bahrain.<sup>358</sup>

None of these black-and-white interpretations (fully backing the regimes or fully siding with the uprisings) provides an accurate description of the Obama administration's response to the Arab Awakening. The purpose of this research was indeed to offer a more nuanced understanding of the US administration's Middle East policy and, especially, to give an answer to our main research question:

"To what extent did President Obama's foreign policy represent a paradigm shift in the traditional US foreign policy toward the Muslim world, and especially toward the region of the Greater Middle East?"

In order to do that, in our Introduction, we highlighted the relevance of the research question and its implications for the protection and promotion of the US national interest. We also described the theoretical background that has provided the analytical tools applied throughout the research. Chapter One was a detailed analysis of the longstanding features of US foreign policy rhetoric, where we stressed the privileged status enjoyed by the idea of US exceptionalism and the myth of US innocence. Chapter Two examined US foreign policy practice. In it, we first discussed the main actors and dynamics involved in the process of US foreign policymaking. Additionally, we studied the concept of the US national interest and its different constituents. Finally, we identified four core US strategic interests that have distinguished US Middle East policy since the end of World War II. Chapter Three through Chapter Seven addressed the Obama administration's response to the 2011-

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<sup>358</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President to the UN General Assembly 2012" (The White House, September 25, 2012), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/25/remarks-president-un-general-assembly>.

12 Arab Awakening. In these chapters, we analyzed five distinct popular uprisings (in Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and Syria) and the US administration's response to them.

Our work resulted in a number of research findings that we are now going to use to determine whether, under the presidency of Barack Obama, continuity or change was the distinctive feature of US foreign policy toward the Greater Middle East. We identified four main research findings.

*1) President Barack Obama embraced the traditional themes of US foreign policy rhetoric*

This research maintains that the predominant brand of US public rhetoric describes the Americans as a chosen people with a special mission to reshape the world according to their universal values. This idea of US exceptionalism contains many different themes that we discussed in Chapter One. We contend that President Obama's own rhetoric systematically resorted to these same traditional themes.

In at least two occasions, President Obama explicitly subscribed to the idea of US exceptionalism.<sup>359</sup> Firstly, during a 2009 news conference in Strasbourg, France:

*"I believe in American Exceptionalism [...] if you think of our current situation, the United States remains the largest economy in the world. We have unmatched military capability. And I think that we have a core set of values that are enshrined in our Constitution, in our body of law, in our democratic practices, in our belief in free speech and equality that, though imperfect, are exceptional."*<sup>360</sup>

Secondly, at the end of his first term as US president: "What makes us *exceptional* -what makes us American- is our allegiance to an idea articulated in a declaration made more than two centuries ago."<sup>361</sup> According to President Obama, the United States was "the greatest nation on Earth" and "a place where all things are possible".<sup>362</sup>

The traditional themes of US global leadership, uniqueness, and indispensability were also frequent in the president's remarks:

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<sup>359</sup> During his tenure, critics questioned President Obama's belief in US exceptionalism. In this research, we could not find consistent rhetorical evidence supporting the validity of such criticisms.

<sup>360</sup> Barack Obama, "The President's News Conference in Strasbourg" (The American Presidency Project, April 4, 2009), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=85959&st=american+exceptionalism&st1>.

<sup>361</sup> Barack Obama, "Inaugural Address 2013" (The American Presidency Project, January 21, 2013), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=102827>.

<sup>362</sup> Barack Obama, "State of the Union Address 2013" (The American Presidency Project, February 12, 2013), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=102826>; Barack Obama, "Victory Speech 2008" (Belfast Telegraph, November 6, 2008), <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/world-news/us-election/transcript-barack-obamas-victory-speech-28453309.html#ixzz1rYc8Zt6U>.



“[...] the *leadership* that has made America not just a place on a map, but the light to the world.”<sup>363</sup>

“For generations, the United States of America has played a *unique role* as an anchor of global security and as an advocate for human freedom.”<sup>364</sup>

“[...] America remains the one *indispensable nation* in world affairs, and as long as I'm President, I intend to keep it that way.”<sup>365</sup>

Moreover, President Obama's rhetoric drew on the time-honored themes of John Winthrop's “city upon a hill” and Thomas Paine's US “power to begin the world all over again”. Winthrop and Paine's legacies were evident in Obama's 2009 address before a joint session of the US Congress:

*“As we stand at this crossroads of history, the eyes of all people in all nations are once again upon us [Winthrop], watching to see what we do with this moment, waiting for us to lead. Those of us gathered here tonight have been called to govern in extraordinary times. It is a tremendous burden, but also a great privilege, one that has been entrusted to few generations of Americans. For in our hands lies the ability to shape our world [Paine] for good or for ill.”*<sup>366</sup>

Following in his predecessors' footsteps, the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States reiterated time and again the universal character of the values promoted by his country, as in occasion of his 2012 remarks to the United Nations General Assembly: “[...] we believe that freedom and self-determination are not unique to one culture. These are not simply American values or Western values -they are *universal values*.”<sup>367</sup>

The idea of US exceptionalism includes two potent components, one religious and one secular. President Obama's statements were punctuated by religious references. For example, in his 2009 Inaugural Speech Obama stated:

*“We remain a young nation, but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things. The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better*

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<sup>363</sup> Barack Obama, “State of the Union Address 2011” (The American Presidency Project, January 25, 2011), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=88928>.

<sup>364</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya 2011” (The White House, March 28, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-address-nation-libya>.

<sup>365</sup> Barack Obama, “State of the Union Address 2012” (The American Presidency Project, January 24, 2012), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=99000>.

<sup>366</sup> Barack Obama, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress” (The American Presidency Project, February 24, 2009), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=85753>.

<sup>367</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President to the UN General Assembly 2012.”

*history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.*”<sup>368</sup>

In addition, under Barack Obama, each and every State of the Union Address, like many other presidential speeches, ended with the familiar formula “God bless America”.

In a similar fashion, President Obama’s rhetoric was filled with secular references to the American Creed. With regard to the political aspects of the Creed, the US president repeatedly expressed his strong faith in the democratic nature of the United States: “The patriots of 1776 [independence from Britain] did not fight to replace the tyranny of a king with the privileges of a few or the rule of a mob. They gave to us a republic, a government of and by and for the people, entrusting each generation to keep safe our founding creed.” As for the economic aspects of the Creed, Obama frequently extolled the positive effects deriving from a free market: “Nor is the question before us whether the market is a force for good or ill. Its power to generate wealth and expand freedom is unmatched.”<sup>369</sup>

In Chapter One we also demonstrated that the traditional public rhetoric of the United States is characterized by a particular foreign policy narrative. This narrative, called the myth of US innocence, provides the prism through which most Americans have generally perceived and understood their country’s foreign policy. The myth of US innocence in world affairs holds that the United States intervenes always in reaction to external events or threats, it is constantly committed to just causes, and it acts invariably with good intentions and for the noblest purposes. In the past, many US presidents subscribed to this myth and President Obama made no exception. In his speech after being awarded the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize, Obama worded the role of the United States in the world in the following way:

*“The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms. The service and sacrifice of our men and women in uniform has promoted peace and prosperity from Germany to Korea, and enabled democracy to take hold in places like the Balkans. We have borne this burden not because we seek to impose our will. We have done so out of enlightened self-interest -because we seek a better future for our children and grandchildren, and we believe*

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<sup>368</sup> Barack Obama, “Inaugural Address 2009” (The American Presidency Project, January 20, 2009), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=44>.

<sup>369</sup> Obama, “Inaugural Address 2013”; Obama, “Inaugural Address 2009,” January 20, 2009.

*that their lives will be better if others' children and grandchildren can live in freedom and prosperity.*"<sup>370</sup>

Chapter Three through Chapter Seven illustrated that, in their public statements, US officials made extensive use of themes drew directly on the myth of US innocence in foreign policy. In this sense, President Obama's narrative of his administration's response to the 2011-12 Arab Awakening was especially telling:

*"We were inspired by the Tunisian protests that toppled a dictator, because we recognized our own beliefs in the aspiration of men and women who took to the streets. We insisted on change in Egypt, because our support for democracy ultimately put us on the side of the people. We supported a transition of leadership in Yemen, because the interests of the people were no longer being served by a corrupt status quo. We intervened in Libya alongside a broad coalition, and with the mandate of the United Nations Security Council, because we had the ability to stop the slaughter of innocents, and because we believed that the aspirations of the people were more powerful than a tyrant. And as we meet here, we again declare that the regime of Bashar al Assad must come to an end so that the suffering of the Syrian people can stop and a new dawn can begin."*<sup>371</sup>

Likewise, President Obama's description of the US decision to contribute assets to the 2011 international military intervention in Libya followed closely the script of the myth of US innocence: "Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different. And as President, I refused to wait for the images of slaughter and mass graves before taking action."<sup>372</sup>

Another traditional theme of the myth of US innocence assigns a special status to the role of the US military and portrays US soldiers as an exceptional force for good. Accordingly, President Obama praised time and again the US armed forces for being the "guardians of our liberty" who "risked their lives and sacrificed their limbs for strangers half a world away." Additionally, for Obama, US soldiers are not only selfless individuals but they are heroes "tempered by the flames of battle" whose skills and courage are "unmatched".<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>370</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize" (The White House, December 10, 2009), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>.

<sup>371</sup> Obama, "Remarks by the President to the UN General Assembly 2012."

<sup>372</sup> Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya 2011."

<sup>373</sup> Obama, "Inaugural Address 2009," January 20, 2009; Obama, "Remarks by the President to the UN General Assembly 2012"; Obama, "State of the Union Address 2012"; Obama, "Inaugural Address 2013."

This representative sample of the wider record of President Obama's rhetoric has clearly showed that the US president subscribed to the main themes of the idea of US exceptionalism (global leadership, uniqueness, indispensability, universality of US values, references to religion and to the American Creed). Moreover, President Obama's description of US involvement in world affairs has distinctly proved the enduring influence of the foreign policy narrative of the myth of US innocence. All that considered, we can confidently argue that Obama's rhetoric displayed a considerable level of continuity with the mainstream tradition of US foreign policy rhetoric.

*2) The core US national interests in the region of the Greater Middle East remained unaltered*

In Chapter Two, we analyzed the concept of the US national interest and we distinguished its various components into two categories: strategic interests and ideal interests.

As for the former, we identified four traditional US strategic interests in the region: access to Middle Eastern energy resources, containment of hostile powers, policies to counter terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the special relationship with Israel. There is abundant evidence supporting the argument that these same interests remained top priorities also under the presidency of Barack Obama. In the 2010 US National Security Strategy document, for example, the Obama administration clearly presented US main strategic interests in the Greater Middle East. They included: cooperation "with our close friend, Israel, and an unshakable commitment to its security"; the containment of Iran and Iranian policies of "pursuit of nuclear weapons, support for terrorism, and threats against its neighbors"; US policies of nonproliferation and counterterrorism; and US unhindered access to the region's energy resources.<sup>374</sup>

Further evidence was provided by our study of the events of the 2011-12 Arab Awakening. Chapter Three through Chapter Seven indicated that US core strategic interests in the Greater Middle East remained unaltered also with regard to the specific Arab countries under analysis. Access to Middle Eastern energy resources was a primary US concern during the popular uprisings in Bahrain and Yemen. US officials were deeply worried that the outbreak of unrest in Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria would jeopardize the US interest of containing hostile powers (namely Iran). Prolonged instability in Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and Syria seriously threatened US regional policies of counterterrorism and nonproliferation. Finally, the security of Israel weighed heavily in the internal debate that framed the Obama administration's response to popular protests in Egypt and Syria.

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<sup>374</sup> Obama, "The National Security Strategy of the United States 2010."

While President Obama's commitment to traditional US strategic interests in the Greater Middle East is well documented, foreign policy commentators hold different opinions about the US president's commitment to the promotion of regional US ideal interests, especially to the issue of democracy promotion.<sup>375</sup>

Some observers argued that democracy promotion was not a US top priority interest when President Obama took office in 2009. According to this view, there is ample evidence indicating that the newly elected president was stepping back from one of the core US national interests. Such evidence includes President Obama's early statements about his willingness to engage diplomatically with nondemocratic governments in countries like Iran, Syria, Russia, and China. Democracy advocates interpreted this policy of engagement as a retreat from the longstanding US policy of promoting the spread of democratic values. A second piece of evidence was the US reaction to popular protests in Iran. In June 2009, in fact, the Iranian government cracked down on the pro-democracy Green Movement that was protesting against alleged irregularities during that year presidential election. The quasi-silent public response of the Obama administration elicited strong criticism. Third, supporters of the view that President Obama was backpedaling on democracy promotion noted that, in the president's 2009 Cairo Speech, democracy ranked only fourth in a list of seven top issues in US-Muslim relations.<sup>376</sup>

We believe that the above analysis is a misreading of the US president's early actions. It is true that, upon taking office, President Obama toned down US rhetoric about democracy promotion. However, that did not necessarily mean the US president was indifferent to the issue. Instead, President Obama's softer rhetoric partly depended on the fact that the concept of democracy promotion had been tainted in the minds of most people (particularly Muslims) by its identification with the 2003 War in Iraq, the War on Terror, and Western interventionism in the Greater Middle East more in general. Therefore, downplaying the role of democracy promotion in the US public discourse was coherent with President Obama's stated goal of improving US-Muslim relations while distancing himself from the policies of President George W. Bush.

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<sup>375</sup> Democracy is an inherently difficult concept to define and it is beyond the scope of this research to offer a comprehensive definition of it. However, in the US public discourse, democracy promotion is commonly associated with the spread of the time-honored US values of freedom, self-determination, elected-leaders, accountability, and a government that reflects the will of the people. This is also the way we have used the concept of democracy in our analysis.

<sup>376</sup> Ellen Hallams, "From Crusader to Exemplar: Bush, Obama and the Reinvigoration of America's Soft Power," *European Journal of American Studies* 1 (2011); Joshua Muravchik, "The Abandonment of Democracy," *Commentary*, June 19, 2009, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2009/06/19/the-abandonment-of-democracy/>; Fred Hiatt, "Will Obama's Foreign Policy Follow His New Democracy Rhetoric?," *The Washington Post*, October 4, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/03/AR2010100303382.html>; The Wall Street Journal, "Democracy's Wane," January 12, 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748703652104574652450396097132>.

Our interviews with former US officials and foreign policy experts provided us with the insights and information necessary to offer a different interpretation of President Obama's policy of engagement with undemocratic governments, mild criticism of the Iranian regime's crackdown on the Green Movement, and the place occupied by democracy promotion in the presidential Cairo Speech. According to our sources, President Obama's policy of diplomatic engagement with undemocratic governments was not a retreat from US traditional support for democracy. On the contrary, diplomatic engagement was a response by the new president to the evident failure of past administrations' "cold-shoulder" policies to produce any significant advance for democracy in those countries. Similarly, US quasi-silent reaction to the forceful repression of the Green Movement in Iran probably depended more on the "timing" (that is the *when* the protest occurred) rather than the "substance" (that is the *why* people were protesting). Iranian demonstrators took to the streets precisely when President Obama had started to engage with the leaders in Teheran on the thorny issue of Iran's nuclear program and at the height of Obama's distancing himself from the G.W. Bush interventionist legacy in the Greater Middle East. Had the Green Movement occurred a year later into President Obama's tenure, the response of the United States might have been quite different. Finally, with regard to President Obama's alleged neglect of democracy promotion during his 2009 Cairo Speech, it is important to remember that such a speech was not intended as a political agenda. It was not a political program describing specific US future policies toward the Muslim world. The Cairo Speech was first and foremost an exercise of public diplomacy. It was a message of friendship toward the Muslim world centered on the idea of setting a new beginning in US-Muslim relations. Therefore, one should not overstate the fact that democracy promotion ranked fourth instead of first in the list of President Obama's top priorities. Especially because the three issues preceding democracy promotion were fighting violent extremism, the Arab-Israeli peace process, and nuclear proliferation –other three core US national interests in the Greater Middle East.<sup>377</sup>

Different interpretations of President Obama's early actions notwithstanding, US public support for democracy promotion became increasingly apparent in the months immediately following the Cairo Speech. In his September 2009 address at the United Nations General Assembly, for example, President Obama conveyed his administration's firm commitment to democracy:

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<sup>377</sup> Dibble Elizabeth, US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Interview; Brown Nathan J., George Washington University Interview; Carothers Thomas, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Interview, interview by Eugenio Lilli, January 16, 2013; Elgindy Khaled, Brookings Institution Interview, interview by Eugenio Lilli, January 23, 2013; Yacoubian Mona, North Africa analyst at the US Department of State (1990-1997) Interview.

*“Democracy cannot be imposed on any nation from the outside. Each society must search for its own path, and no path is perfect [...] There are basic principles that are universal; there are certain truths which are self-evident -- and the United States of America will never waver in our efforts to stand up for the right of people everywhere to determine their own destiny.”*<sup>378</sup>

In summer 2010, the United States was actively monitoring the political situation in the region of the Greater Middle East. In August, President Obama reportedly circulated among senior members of his administration a memorandum called “Political Reform in the Middle East and North Africa”. The presidential memorandum assessed that, without significant reforms toward more democratic forms of government, the region was ripe for political turmoil.<sup>379</sup>

However, as extensively illustrated in Chapter Three through Chapter Seven, it was the outbreak of the Arab Awakening that brought the issue of democracy promotion unquestionably to the forefront of the US foreign policy debate. In fact, accurately or not, the Arab Awakening was generally perceived as a popular struggle aimed at transforming autocratic and repressive regimes into freer and more democratic forms of government.

In March 2011, while explaining US military intervention in support of the Libyan opposition, President Obama noted that “the United States of America was founded on the belief that people should govern themselves. And now we cannot hesitate to stand squarely on the side of those who are reaching for their rights, knowing that their success will bring about a world that is more peaceful, more stable, and more just.”<sup>380</sup> President Obama also expressed his belief that ideal interests were top priorities for the United States as much as core strategic interests:

*“The United States supports a set of universal rights. And these rights include free speech, the freedom of peaceful assembly, the freedom of religion, equality for men and women under the rule of law, and the right to choose your own leaders [...] Our support for these principles is not a secondary interest. Today I want to make it clear that it is a top priority that must be translated into concrete actions, and supported by all of the diplomatic, economic and*

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<sup>378</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President to the United Nations General Assembly 2009” (The White House, September 23, 2009), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-united-nations-general-assembly>.

<sup>379</sup> Lizza, “How the Arab Spring Remade Obama’s Foreign Policy”; Mark Landler, “Obama Ordered Secret Report on Unrest in Arab World,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 2011, sec. World / Middle East, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/17/world/middleeast/17diplomacy.html>.

<sup>380</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya 2011.”

*strategic tools at our disposal [...] it will be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy.* „<sup>381</sup>

In his April 2011 remarks on the Syrian uprising, the US president reaffirmed in clear terms his country's unwavering support for the spread of democratic values: “The United States will continue to stand up for democracy and the universal rights that all human beings deserve, in Syria and around the world.”<sup>382</sup>

Finally, in May 2011, President Obama publicly declared that he had been committed to democracy promotion in the Greater Middle East all along, at least since the 2009 Cairo Speech. In the US president's own words: “that's why, two years ago in Cairo, I began to broaden our engagement based upon mutual interests and mutual respect. I believed then –and I believe now– that we have a stake not just in the stability of nations, but in the self-determination of individuals.”<sup>383</sup>

Since 2009, we witnessed a *crescendo* in President Obama's public support for democracy. Despite an arguable slow start, US support steadily increased and probably reached its climax around spring 2011, when popular uprisings in the Greater Middle East thrust the issue of democracy promotion firmly back into the limelight. President Obama's continued commitment to the promotion of US ideal interests in the region went hand in hand with the US president's well-documented commitment to the protection of traditional US strategic interests. Given that, we can state with certainty that, under the presidency of Barack Obama, US core national interests in the Greater Middle East remained unaltered.

*3) The Obama administration's response to the Arab Awakening was more consistent than it has been generally acknowledged to be*

In his response to the Arab Awakening, President Obama did not follow a single panoptic approach but, instead, his administration devised *ad hoc* policies to address the specific circumstances of each individual uprising. As a result, the United States was perceived as embracing popular uprisings in some countries while not in others. Critics charged President Obama of inconsistency in his policy response toward the Awakening. This sense of inconsistency was only reinforced by the lack of a clear Obama doctrine for the Greater Middle East. Observers, in fact, noted that President Obama did not formulate an all-encompassing strategy for the region or, at least, anything closely resembling, for example, the previous Eisenhower or G.W. Bush doctrines. During the 2008

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<sup>381</sup> Ibid.

<sup>382</sup> Obama, “Statement by the President on Syria 22/04/2011.”

<sup>383</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa.”



presidential campaign, candidate Barack Obama announced that his foreign policy was “not going to be as doctrinaire as the Bush doctrine, because the world is complicated.” In March 2011, President Obama reaffirmed his position while discussing the ongoing uprisings in the Greater Middle East: “when you start applying blanket policies on the complexities of the current world situation, you’re going to get yourself into trouble.” While recognizing the absence of a clear Obama doctrine for the region, we take issue with the charge of inconsistency. We suggest, in fact, that the Obama administration’s response to the Arab Awakening was more consistent than it has generally been acknowledged.<sup>384</sup>

First, Chapter Three through Chapter Seven established that, when confronted by a situation of conflicting US national interests, President Obama consistently prioritized strategic interests over ideal interests. This was especially evident with regard to the US response to the Bahraini uprising. In Bahrain, the US strategic concern of maintaining military cooperation with the Bahraini royal family, and its patrons in Saudi Arabia, outweighed the US ideal interest of siding with protesters demanding political and economic reforms. Hence, President Obama’s mild criticism of, and no concrete actions against, the Al Khalifas’ crackdown on mostly peaceful demonstrators. Similarly, the United States backed political change in Egypt, Yemen, and Syria only when US officials came to the conclusion that the US ideal interest of supporting the uprisings had eventually aligned with US strategic interests. Consistently, and in line with the traditional US foreign policy toward the Greater Middle East, President Obama ranked strategic interests higher than ideal interests in framing his administration’s response to the Arab Awakening.

Second, President Obama was consistent in pursuing his administration’s preferred policy options. When popular uprisings did not reach a critical mass, the Obama administration systematically leaned toward sustaining the status quo and encouraged the incumbent regimes to address the legitimate demands of the people. This is how the United States responded to popular protests in Bahrain and also in other Arab kingdoms like Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Jordan. When popular

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<sup>384</sup> Frank James, “Complex Libya Offers No Simple Answers So Obama Has None,” *National Public Radio*, March 23, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/itsallpolitics/2011/03/23/134781423/complex-libya-offers-no-simple-answers-so-obama-has-none>; Dominic Tierney, *The Obama Doctrine and the Lessons of Iraq* (Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 2012), [http://www.fpri.org/enotes/05/201205.tierney.obama-doctrine-iraq.html#\\_ftn1](http://www.fpri.org/enotes/05/201205.tierney.obama-doctrine-iraq.html#_ftn1); Daniel Drezner, “Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy?,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 4 (August 2011): 57–68; David E. Sanger, “Syria, Iran and the Obama Doctrine,” *The New York Times*, February 25, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/26/sunday-review/syria-iran-and-the-obama-doctrine.html?pagewanted=1&ref=syria>; Fareed Zakaria, “Stop Searching for an Obama Doctrine,” *The Washington Post*, July 6, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/stop-searching-for-an-obama-doctrine/2011/07/06/gIQAQMmI1H\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/stop-searching-for-an-obama-doctrine/2011/07/06/gIQAQMmI1H_story.html); David Millar, “Waiting for the Obama Doctrine, Intervallum: The Revolutions in North Africa and Middle East,” *Huffingtonpost*, February 3, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-millar/waiting-for-the-obama-doc\\_1\\_b\\_817934.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-millar/waiting-for-the-obama-doc_1_b_817934.html); Barack Obama, Obama: We’ve Put Gadhafi ‘Back on His Heels’, interview by Brian Williams, March 29, 2011, <http://archives.nbclearn.com/portal/site/k-12/flatview?cuecard=52686>.

uprisings did reach a critical mass and continued instability threatened the US national interest, the Obama administration consistently advocated for an orderly transition of power. This was the case of the uprisings in Egypt and Yemen that led to the resignation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Finally, only when the first two policy options failed, the Obama administration had to devise *ad hoc* policies which depended on local and international developments that US officials could not completely control. The US response to the crises in Libya and Syria were cases in point.

Third, President Obama consistently conveyed his preference for diplomatic solutions to the complex crises facing the countries affected by the Arab Awakening. Early in his presidency, Obama declared:

*“I [...] believe that events in Iraq have reminded America of the need to use diplomacy and build international consensus to resolve our problems whenever possible. Indeed, we can recall the words of Thomas Jefferson, who said: ‘I hope that our wisdom will grow with our power, and teach us that the less we use our power the greater it will be’.”*<sup>385</sup>

Accordingly, the Obama administration systematically relied on diplomatic tools when addressing the uprisings in Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria. An express preference for diplomacy went together with a distinct reluctance to resort to US military power. The US response to the Syrian uprising was especially revealing. On that occasion, in fact, President Obama reportedly vetoed a plan sponsored by high ranking officials in his administration that would have committed the United States to assist militarily groups within the anti-Assad opposition. Libya was the only case during the Arab Awakening when President Obama decided to resort to US military power. Nevertheless, the US president did so only after having secured a broad international support for the military intervention (including that of the United Nations, the Arab League, and NATO) and only after having received assurances that other countries (especially France and Britain) would take the lead of the military operations. Here, a distinction is in order. President Obama was not reluctant to resort to military power *tout court*. In fact, the US president opted for a selective use of US military power. While wary of deploying large numbers of US military assets, particularly ground troops, President Obama proved willing to increase US reliance on small special operations forces and unmanned aerial vehicles. This was especially evident with regard to US counterterrorism and

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<sup>385</sup> Obama, “Cairo Speech.”

counter-insurgency policies in Yemen against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and also across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border against the Taliban and Al Qaeda.<sup>386</sup>

Fourth, in line with his goal of distancing himself from the previous G.W. Bush administrations, President Obama was consistent in favoring multilateralism over unilateralism. In 2009, the US president announced that the United States stood “ready to begin a new chapter of international cooperation -one that recognizes the rights and responsibilities of all nations. And so, with confidence in our cause, and with a commitment to our values, we call on all nations to join us in building the future that our people so richly deserve.” In Libya, the Obama administration directed a diplomatic effort that resulted in a UN-mandated, Arab League-sponsored, and NATO-led international military intervention in support of the Libyan uprising against Col. Qaddafi. In Syria, US officials coordinated with their European allies to impose economic sanctions on the Assad regime, assiduously worked through the United Nations to find a collective solution to the crisis, and sponsored the formation of the Friends of Syria Group to facilitate cooperation among countries sympathetic to the uprising. In Yemen, the United States backed multilateral initiatives by the United Nations Security Council and the Gulf Cooperation Council that eventually led to Yemeni President Saleh’s resignation and to a peaceful transition of power to Vice-President Abd Rabbo Mansur Hadi. President Obama’s preference for multilateralism was less evident in the US response to the Egyptian and Bahraini uprisings. However, this mostly depended on the specific characteristics of the two popular uprisings rather than on a US rejection of multilateral action. In Egypt, the outcome of the uprising was ultimately decided by domestic actors and dynamics. Foreign actors, including the United States, played only a secondary role. Therefore, there was no serious concerted international action that convinced Egyptian President Mubarak to step down. In Bahrain, given the vital US strategic interests at stake in the bilateral relationship with the Bahraini rulers, the Obama administration proved reluctant to bring any significant unilateral or multilateral pressure to bear on the Al Khalifas. On the contrary, the US administration acquiesced in the Gulf Cooperation Council’s decision to send the Peninsula Shield Force to help the Bahraini government to retake control of the country.

Fifth, President Obama consistently conveyed his willingness to respect the right of other peoples to choose their own path of political development. Addressing the United Nations General Assembly in 2012, the US president declared that “the United States has not and will not seek to dictate the

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<sup>386</sup> Newton David, former US Ambassador to Yemen (1994-1997) and Iraq (1984-1988) Interview; Aftandilian Gregory, Center for National Policy Interview; Indyk, Lieberthal, and O’Hanlon, *Bending History: Barack Obama’s Foreign Policy*; The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, “Covert Drone War,” accessed February 6, 2014, <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/>.

outcome of democratic elections abroad.” As a result, the Obama administration displayed an unusual disposition to engage with non-traditional US interlocutors, in particular with Islamist groups. Democratic elections in post-Mubarak Egypt were a case in point. In Egypt, in fact, the US administration recognized as legitimate the results of democratic elections that brought to power the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, the United States accepted power transition plans that markedly increased the presence and influence of Islamists in the post-uprising governments of countries such as Libya, Yemen, and Tunisia.<sup>387</sup> President Obama’s disposition to engage with non-traditional US interlocutors also extended beyond the specific events of the Arab Awakening to include attempts to start constructive talks with the Islamist government in Iran and the Taliban-led Islamist insurgency in Afghanistan.<sup>388</sup>

All that considered, we maintain that, in spite of the lack of an all-encompassing doctrine for the Greater Middle East, the Obama administration’s response to the Arab Awakening showed more consistency than it has been generally acknowledged.

#### *4) President Barack Obama failed to significantly ameliorate US-Muslim relations*

Throughout history, US foreign policy has sometimes displayed an evident disconnect between rhetoric and practice. This has been especially true in the case of US policies toward the region of the Greater Middle East. US foreign policy rhetoric, in fact, praises the value of promoting democracy and contends that ideal interests are US top-priorities as much as realist or socio-economic (strategic) interests. US foreign policy practice, instead, testifies to the existence of an undeniable hierarchy of US national interests where strategic interests carry more importance than ideal interests.

When US officials’ public rhetoric does not match US actual policies on the ground, the United States leaves itself open to criticism. Charges of US hypocrisy and US double standards in foreign policy have proved particularly popular within Muslim communities. Moreover, criticisms of being hypocritical and of having double standards add to unpopular US regional policies (i.e. unwavering support for Israel) to negatively affect the image of the United States in the Greater Middle East.

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<sup>387</sup> Here, we do not consider the cases of Bahrain and Syria because, by the end of 2012, neither of these two countries had undergone a clear transition of power: the Al-Khalifa royal family was still ruling Bahrain while Syria had plunged into a state of lawlessness and civil war.

<sup>388</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President to the UN General Assembly 2012”; Bouchet, “The Democracy Tradition in US Foreign Policy and the Obama Presidency”; Gerges, *Obama and the Middle East*; Peter Beinart, “Obama’s Real Failure: Not Talking to the Taliban Enough,” *The Atlantic Online*, June 5, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/obamas-real-failure-not-talking-to-the-taliban-enough/372201/>.

In the Introduction, we offered data from different survey polls showing the distinctly tense US-Muslim relationship inherited by President Obama upon taking office. Since the beginning of his presidency, Obama committed his administration to a policy of outreach toward Muslim communities aimed at amending US relations with the Muslim world. In his 2009 Inaugural Address, the US president directly addressed the issue of the disconnect between rhetoric and practice in US foreign policy. On that occasion, President Obama rejected “as false the choice between our safety and our ideals [...] Those ideals still light the world, and we will not give them up for expedience’s sake.” In addition, the US president, in his 2009 Cairo Speech, announced his intention to reset those US policies toward the Muslim world that had resulted in “fear and mistrust” and in a “cycle of suspicion and discord”. In the Introduction, we also indicated that President Obama’s election and early policy of outreach to Muslims were welcomed by many people, including in the Greater Middle East, and raised expectations for improved US-Muslim relations.<sup>389</sup>

In spite of President Obama’s attempt to align US foreign policy practice more closely with the values and ideas traditionally championed by US rhetoric, Chapter Three through Chapter Seven established that manifest tensions between words and actions persisted in the Obama administration’s response to the Arab Awakening. Bold US statements in favor of the promotion of democratic values, in fact, clashed with cautious US policies of qualified support for the popular uprisings. In addition, despite the initial optimism, survey polls taken after the outbreak of the Arab Awakening showed that President Obama’s policies failed to mend the rift existing between the United States and Muslim communities.

According to a May 2011 poll, majorities in six predominantly Muslim countries (Egypt, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, Turkey, Pakistan, and Indonesia) said they were very or somewhat worried that the United States could become a military threat to their country someday. Likewise, a July 2011 poll revealed that Arab favorable attitudes toward the United States (in Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) had dropped to levels lower than they were in 2008, the last year of the G.W. Bush administration. This second poll also found out that Arabs generally viewed US interference in the Arab world as one of the greatest threats to the region’s peace and stability. The findings of another survey poll taken in 2013 held that among the various regions surveyed, people in the Greater Middle East expressed the lowest levels of confidence in President Obama and gave the US president’s foreign policy agenda very low marks. Even more tellingly, when specifically asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement that Barack Obama had met the expectations he had set in his speech at Cairo University in 2009, large majorities in Morocco,

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<sup>389</sup> Obama, “Inaugural Address 2009,” January 20, 2009; Obama, “Cairo Speech.”

Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia (all Muslim-majority countries) disagreed. Such a documented persistence of “fear and mistrust” in Arabs’ attitudes toward the United States suggests that Arab publics (incidentally the same people who were directly affected by the Arab Awakening and the Obama administration’s response to it) did not notice any marked change in the fundamentals of US foreign policy toward the Greater Middle East. As for the way Americans perceived Muslims and Islam, a number of survey polls carried out between 2011 and 2012 detected no sign of improvement but, rather, they showed that Americans’ attitudes toward Muslims and Islam had slightly deteriorated. Given the above evidence, we can confidently argue that President Obama’s policy of outreach to Muslim communities did not achieve the stated goal of amending US-Muslim relations.<sup>390</sup>

Now, let us go back to our main research question: “To what extent did President Obama’s foreign policy represent a paradigm shift in the traditional US foreign policy toward the Muslim world, and especially toward the region of the Greater Middle East?”

In the Introduction, we stated that in order to offer a more accurate answer we would analyze this question at three distinct levels: at the level of the actual US foreign policies implemented on the ground, at the level of the rhetoric used by US officials to describe such policies, and at the level of the relationship between US practice and US rhetoric. Our research findings have provided compelling evidence supporting the argument that President Obama’s foreign policy showed considerable continuity with the past at all three levels. First, President Obama continued the longstanding US practice of favoring the protection of strategic interests over the promotion of ideal interests. Second, Obama’s rhetoric perpetuated the traditional themes of the mainstream brand of US foreign policy rhetoric. Third, during the Obama presidency, tensions frequently arose between US foreign policies on the ground and US officials’ public statements. All that considered, our final assessment is that President Obama’s first term did not yield to any substantial paradigm shift in the US foreign policy toward the Muslim world. The ambitious *new beginning* in US-Muslim relations announced by the US president in Cairo in 2009 failed to materialize. Four years into the Obama’s

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<sup>390</sup> Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Arab Spring Fails to Improve U.S. Image*, May 17, 2011, <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2011/05/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Arab-Spring-FINAL-May-17-2011.pdf>; Zogby International, *Arab Attitudes, 2011* (Arab American Institute Foundation, July 2011), [http://b3cdn.net/aai/3c5edf53ed2f56e799\\_5qm6ba4r9.pdf](http://b3cdn.net/aai/3c5edf53ed2f56e799_5qm6ba4r9.pdf); Pew Global Attitudes Project, *America’s Global Image Remains More Positive than China’s*, July 18, 2013, <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2013/07/Pew-Research-Global-Attitudes-Project-Balance-of-Power-Report-FINAL-July-18-2013.pdf>; Shibley Telhami and Steven Kull, *The American Public on the 9/11 Decade* (Brookings Institution, September 8, 2011), [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2011/9/08-opinion-poll-telhami/0908\\_opinion\\_poll\\_telhami.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2011/9/08-opinion-poll-telhami/0908_opinion_poll_telhami.pdf); Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Muslim-Western Tensions Persist*; Arab American Institute, *The American Divide: How We View Arabs and Muslims*, August 23, 2012.

presidency, we can confidently state that traditional features of US foreign policy continued to dominate the country's international relations in the Greater Middle East.

Moreover, our research findings allow us to offer a categorization of President Obama's foreign policy within the broader tradition of US foreign policy. The multifaceted nature of foreign policymaking inevitably makes any attempt to put a US president's foreign policy into a single category a simplification of an otherwise much more complex reality. Aware of the limits of any such a categorization, we could generally describe President Obama's foreign policy as having two main souls. A Wilsonian soul, holding that the United States has the special mission of and a national interest in spreading its values throughout the world, characterized Obama's foreign policy rhetoric. A realist soul, primarily concerned with issues of *realpolitik* and power politics, informed Obama's foreign policy practice, especially with regard to the president's policy toward the Greater Middle East. We could consider President Obama's foreign policy as a clear example of what Professor John Mearsheimer accurately describes as "Liberal Talk, Realist Thinking" in US foreign policy.<sup>391</sup>

That said, the lack of meaningful change in US Middle East policy under President Barack Obama should not be ascribed solely to the US president's personal shortcomings. In fact, the guidelines provided by the theories of Foreign Policy Analysis enabled us to detect a number of internal and external factors that also accounted for the continuity observed in President Obama's foreign policy toward the region. As already noted, the paramount factor accounting for the Obama administration's cautious and qualified support for the popular uprisings was the presence, in the countries affected by the Arab Awakening, of vital US strategic interests. This was generally the case of the uprisings in Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria. On the contrary, when the United States had no vital strategic interests at stake in the country (as in the case of Libya), the Obama administration proved willing to fully back the popular uprising. Although paramount in influencing the US administration's response to the Arab Awakening, the existence of vital US strategic interests was not the only factor constraining the ability of the United States to promote change in the Greater Middle East.

Some of these limiting factors predated the outbreak of the Arab Awakening. By early 2011, US economic power was declining because of the country's fiscal problems. As a consequence, the economic ability of the United States to sustain transitions to democracy decreased as well. Tellingly, by the end of President Obama's first term, the only region-wide initiative proposed by

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<sup>391</sup> Mead, *Special Providence*; Mearsheimer, "Liberal Talk, Realist Thinking."

the US president to foster democratic transitions (the Middle East and North Africa Incentive Fund) had yet to see the light of day.<sup>392</sup> In addition, the protracted and unsuccessful military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq had cast doubts on what US military power could achieve. Domestically, the high costs, both in terms of lives and treasury, of such military campaigns had also made the US public extremely wary of new military interventions in Muslim countries. Moreover, diplomatic failures early in Obama's tenure had decreased US political power. The Obama administration's inability to induce any real progress either in the Arab-Israeli peace process or in the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program were cases in point. Finally, US soft power and moral standing in the Greater Middle East had been severely tarnished in the eyes of the Arab public by the unilateralist policies and the controversial practices of the previous G.W. Bush administrations and the US Global War on Terror. Lingering suspicion of US hidden motives and real intentions made it harder for the Obama administration to present itself as an honest broker in solving the region's crises.<sup>393</sup>

Chapter Three through Chapter Seven showed that other limiting factors emerged after the outbreak of the Arab Awakening. As predicted by Foreign Policy Analysis theorists, such factors were both external and internal. As for the external factors, concerns of important US regional allies, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, put serious constraints to the Obama administration's ability to wholeheartedly support political change in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria. Similarly, profound disagreement with the governments of Russia and China severely reduced the range of options available to the US administration to address the crisis in Syria. Moreover, US leverage in Egypt and Yemen was also limited by the mostly local nature of the domestic politics that ultimately determined the outcome of these two uprisings.

As for the internal factors, US domestic political considerations often tilted the balance against policies of unconditional support for political change in the Greater Middle East. In this sense, three examples mentioned in our work were particularly revealing. In Egypt, US arms manufacturers openly expressed, through the US Department of Defense, their concern that an abrupt end of the regime of President Mubarak could result into the disruption of the profitable contracts existing between such US companies and the Egyptian government. In Bahrain, US policymakers worried

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<sup>392</sup> In the 2015 federal budget, requests for the Middle East and North Africa Incentive Fund (MENA IF) were abandoned by the administration and replaced by a new, much smaller MENA Initiative Fund. Stephen McNerney and Cole Bockenfeld, *The Federal Budget and Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2015: Democracy, Governance, and Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa* (POMED, June 2014), <http://pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/FY2015-Budget-Report.pdf>.

<sup>393</sup> Shadi Hamid and Peter Mandaville, "The U.S. Is Giving Up on Middle East Democracy—and That's a Mistake," *The Atlantic Online*, January 7, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/01/the-us-is-giving-up-on-middle-east-democracy-and-thats-a-mistake/282890/>.



that the overthrow of the pro-US Al Khalifa royal family would force the United States to relocate its military assets away from the island. Such an expensive relocation, especially after having invested significant amounts of taxpayers' money there, would have been hard to explain to a budget-wary US public opinion. In Syria, President Obama's preoccupation with the incoming 2012 presidential elections made the US president particularly reluctant to increase his administration's involvement in the crisis. In fact, President Obama and his advisers feared that the decision to commit the US military in the Syrian armed conflict would result in losing votes and, consequently, jeopardize Barack Obama's chances for reelection.

To sum up, this research has established that, along with an undeniable and paramount concern for the protection of vital US strategic interests, a series of other important factors, internal and external, preceding and following the outbreak of the Arab Awakening, accounted for President Obama's failure to substantially reorient the foreign policy of the United States toward the Greater Middle East. Our research, therefore, leaves the reader with a sober assessment about the possibility to bring about meaningful change in a country's foreign policy. In fact, high expectations for change, originating from the inspiring rhetoric of a new leadership, seem misplaced. Despite the admitted potential of human agency and actors specificity to be important drivers of change, this research has showed that it takes more than a new leader's goodwill to alter the fundamentals of a country's international behavior.

### **Implications for the United States**

The absence of any significant change displayed by the Middle East policy of the first Obama administration is in stark contrast with the transformative nature of the events that have upset the region since 2011. In the last section of this chapter, we briefly discuss the implications, as of the end of 2014, of the Arab Awakening for core US strategic and ideal interests in the Greater Middle East.

#### *1) Access to Middle Eastern energy resources*

The Arab Awakening threatened the US interest of maintaining unhindered access to the region's energy resources by directly affecting oil and gas producing countries in the Greater Middle East. In Libya, according to the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), exports of energy products suffered "near-total disruption" during the months of the armed conflict between Col. Qaddafi's loyalists and Libyan opposition forces. Libya's production began to recover in 2012. However,

labor-related protests and infighting among different armed militias led to the blockade of at least four major export terminals in summer 2013. The Libyan government eventually regained control of the terminals in mid-2014. Since then, in spite of continued chaos in the country, Libyan production and exports have steadily increased. With regard to Syria, the EIA says that the country's "oil and natural gas production has declined dramatically since March 2011". Two main reasons account for the sharp decline. One is the ongoing civil war pitting President Assad's troops against a myriad of armed opposition groups. Another reason is the imposition of international sanctions, especially US and European ones, on Syria's export of energy products. The EIA assessment is that given the current situation "Syria's energy sector is unlikely to recover in the near term."

Nevertheless, as we have previously explained, the United States has not traditionally relied on energy imports from either Libya or Syria. Therefore, disruptions of supply from these two Middle Eastern countries have not meaningfully hampered the ability of the United States to satisfy its energy needs.<sup>394</sup>

Moreover, the Arab Awakening put at risk US energy interests in the Greater Middle East by testing US relations with the leaderships of countries in the oil and gas producing region of the Persian Gulf. The uprising in Bahrain highlighted differences between the Obama administration and the Al Khalifas over the Bahraini authorities' handling of the popular protests. Such differences resulted in open diplomatic incidents, like when, in summer 2014, US Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Tom Malinowski was expelled from Bahrain after holding an "unauthorized" meeting with members of the Bahraini opposition. Divergent opinions over the uprising notwithstanding, US-Bahraini military cooperation has remained strong. The continued strength of the bilateral relationship was displayed in September 2014 when Bahrain joined a US-led military campaign by flying airstrikes against Islamist extremist groups in Syria and Iraq. As for Yemen, the Obama administration sponsored a Gulf Cooperation Council transition plan for the removal of President Saleh, with whom the United States had had a contentious relationship. Since the power transition, the US administration has employed both economic and diplomatic tools to shore up the position of newly-elected President Hadi. In return, the new Yemeni president has offered unqualified endorsement to US counterterrorism operations in the country. US and Yemeni

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<sup>394</sup> US Energy Information Administration, "Country Analysis Brief: Libya"; Al Arabiya, "Libya Sees Oil Production up to 1.5 Mn Bpd by Year-End Despite Chaos," September 11, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/business/energy/2014/09/11/Libya-sees-oil-production-up-to-1-5-mn-bpd-by-year-end-despite-chaos-.html>; US Energy Information Administration, "Country Analysis Brief: Syria," accessed October 18, 2014, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=sy>; US Energy Information Administration, *US Imports by Country of Origin*.

officials have repeatedly expressed the soundness of the bilateral relationship. For example, during a 2012 phone call, President Hadi and US Counterterrorism Advisor John Brennan described as “unshakeable” the partnership between the governments of two countries. Although Saudi Arabia was not directly affected by meaningful protests, the Saudi kingdom became actively involved in the regional dynamics of the Arab Awakening. The view of the Saudi leadership on the popular uprisings did not always align with that of the Obama administration. Especially manifest frictions broke out in the open after the ouster of Egyptian President Mubarak. Some observers went so far as to describe the bilateral relationship as “dramatically deteriorating”. Since then, however, the Obama administration has assiduously worked to mend the relationship with its strategic Gulf partner, and third largest source of US oil imports. This effort by the US administration has included frequent visits by top administration officials and major arms sales. Despite evident differences over regional developments, the United States and Saudi Arabia continue to cooperate closely on critical issues of regional security and global economic stability. In the words of the Saudi foreign minister, “it’s only natural that our [US and Saudi] policies and views might see agreement in some areas and disagreement in others. That’s perfectly normal in any serious relationship that spans a wide range of issues.” In addition, the Saudi foreign minister downplayed the nature of such differences by calling them differences in tactics and not in objectives.<sup>395</sup>

## 2) *Containment of hostile powers*

Widespread social and political turmoil in the Greater Middle East had the potential to weaken the decades-old US policy of containment of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its nuclear ambitions. In fact, the 2011-12 popular uprisings severely challenged, and sometimes removed, a number of Middle Eastern regimes that were hostile to Iranian interests (i.e. the regimes of Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen). Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei, declared that the Arab Awakening was indeed an “Islamic Awakening” and that the popular protests were a natural extension of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. However, Khamenei’s attempt to claim the mantle of the Arab Awakening

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<sup>395</sup> Lesley Wroughton and David Storey, “Kerry Calls Bahrain Minister Over Expulsion of U.S. Official,” *Reuters*, July 14, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/14/us-bahrain-usa-idUSKBN0FJ2PY20140714>; Kenneth Katzman, *Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy 03/10/2014* (Congressional Research Service, October 3, 2014), <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/95-1013.pdf>; Scott Shane, “Yemen’s Leader Praises U.S. Drone Strikes,” *The New York Times*, September 29, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/29/world/middleeast/yemens-leader-president-hadi-praises-us-drone-strikes.html?ref=yemen>; The White House, “Statement by the Press Secretary on John Brennan’s Call with President Hadi of Yemen 21/05/2012,” May 21, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/21/statement-press-secretary-john-brennans-call-president-hadi-yemen>; John Kerry, “Remarks with Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal” (US Department of State, November 4, 2013), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/11/216236.htm>; BBC, “US Sells \$30bn in F-15 Jets to Saudi Arabia,” December 29, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-16358068>; Christopher M. Blanchard, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations 12/02/2014* (Congressional Research Service, February 12, 2014), <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33533.pdf>.

failed, mostly because it lacked credibility. Protesters in the Arab world, in fact, had not forgotten the violence unleashed by the Iranian regime in 2009 to crack down on its domestic pro-democracy movement.<sup>396</sup>

Additionally, the strict regime of sanctions imposed by the United States and other countries on Iran's energy and financial sectors has damaged Iran's economy. The loss of oil revenues has been particularly significant. By late 2013, oil exports, that funded nearly half of the Iranian regime's expenditures, dropped to about 1 million barrels per day from the 2.5 million barrels per day level during 2011.<sup>397</sup>

Despite a poor reputation as a champion of democracy promotion and a reduced ability to use its economic power as a foreign policy tool, real or presumed Iranian influence was often perceived across the region. In particular, the governments of Bahrain and Yemen repeatedly accused Iran of meddling in their domestic affairs. The Al Khalifas charged Bahraini Shiite protesters of being Iranian agents while Yemeni officials claimed that Iran offered support to the Houthis, a predominantly Shiite insurgent movement active in northern Yemen. Recently, also senior US intelligence officials have openly referred to the fact that Iran "will continue to provide arms and other aid" to Shiite militants in Bahrain and Houthi rebels in Yemen. The Iranian regime has systematically rejected such accusations.<sup>398</sup>

Conversely, there are less doubts with regard to Iran's involvement in the Syrian uprising. Many reports, in fact, describe Iranian diplomatic, economic, and military support for the regime of President Assad. Official statements about Iran's steadfast commitment to the survival of the Assad regime have been coupled with substantial economic assistance. Moreover, Iran has also provided the Syrian military with weapons, equipment, training, and advice. For example, according to the US Department of the Treasury, Iran has been critical to the establishment and training of the Jaysh al Sha'bi militia: a 50,000 strong Syrian paramilitary group that fights alongside Assad's

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<sup>396</sup> Scott Peterson, "Iran's Khamenei Praises Egyptian Protesters, Declares 'Islamic Awakening,'" *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 4, 2011, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0204/Iran-s-Khamenei-praises-Egyptian-protesters-declares-Islamic-awakening>.

<sup>397</sup> Kenneth Katzman, *Iran Sanctions 19/08/2014* (Congressional Research Service, August 19, 2014), <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS20871.pdf>.

<sup>398</sup> Zahra Hosseinian, "Iran Rejects Interference Accusation by Gulf Arabs," *Reuters*, December 26, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/26/us-iran-gulf-idUSBRE8BP02L20121226>; Haytham Mouzahem, "Iran's Angle in Yemen," *Al-Monitor*, n.d., <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/iran-angle-yemen-relations.html#>; James Clapper, "Testimony of James R. Clapper Director of National Intelligence in Front of the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence" (US Congress, January 29, 2014), 14, [http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Intelligence%20Reports/2014%20WTA%20%20SFR\\_SSCI\\_29\\_Jan.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Intelligence%20Reports/2014%20WTA%20%20SFR_SSCI_29_Jan.pdf).

government forces. The prolonged armed conflict in Syria seems to have further strengthened the alliance between the leaderships in Damascus and Tehran.<sup>399</sup>

### *3) Policies to counter terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)*

When the Arab Awakening broke out, Al Qaeda tried to take credit for the popular uprisings that were upsetting the Greater Middle East. Al Qaeda leader, Ayman al Zawahiri, stated that the Arab Awakening was a direct consequence of the 9/11 terrorist attacks a decade earlier. Al Qaeda and other likeminded extremist groups depicted the objectives of the uprisings as in line with their rejection of the status quo in the region. Despite their efforts, such groups had a marginal role in the initial phases of the uprisings. In fact, political, social, and economic grievances, rather than violent extremist rhetoric, were the main reasons that brought millions of people to the streets. Even more significantly, from a US counterterrorism perspective, the overwhelmingly peaceful nature of the popular protests appeared to have fatally undermined the extremists' argument that only violence could achieve significant change in the Greater Middle East. After all, two weeks of peaceful mass protests in Egypt had driven Egyptian President Mubarak out of office; something that extremists like Zawahiri had failed to achieve after decades of armed struggle.<sup>400</sup>

However, in some of the countries affected by the Arab Awakening, continued instability and the collapse of state security organizations relaxed the pressure on extremist groups and provided them with more freedom of action. This was especially true in countries that experienced violent armed conflict. The transformation of a peaceful uprising into a civil war in Syria offered an opportunity to extremist organizations, like Jabhat al Nusra and the Islamic State, to marginalize the "moderate" opposition and increase their appeal among the populace. Post-uprising Libya is another telling example. After the forced removal of Col. Qaddafi, the country has plunged into a state of lawlessness and conflict. According to a US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's 2014 declassified report, Libya has dangerously turned into a safe haven, training ground, and travel route for extremist fighters and weapons. Also post-Mubarak Egypt has not been exempt from terrorist activity. A group called Ansar Bayt al Maqdis, in particular, has become active across the

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<sup>399</sup> Karim Sanjadpour, "Iran's Unwavering Support to Assad's Syria," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 27, 2013, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/08/27/iran-s-unwavering-support-to-assad-s-syria>; US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Al-Nusra Front Leadership in Syria and Militias Supporting the Assad Regime," December 11, 2012, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/tg1797.aspx>.

<sup>400</sup> Associated Press, "Al-Qaida Leader Seeks Credit for Arab Spring," *The Guardian*, September 13, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/13/al-qaida-leader-arab-spring>; Eugenio Lilli, "Revolts in the Arab World: Is It Bad News for Islamic Terrorists?," *Journal of Terrorism Research* 2, no. 1 (April 2011), <http://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/jtr/article/view/179>.

Sinai Peninsula. Since 2013, Ansar Bayt al Maqdis operatives have claimed responsibility for a number of terrorist attacks especially targeting Egyptian authorities.<sup>401</sup>

As for Yemen, President Hadi has so far proved more forthcoming than his predecessor Saleh in cooperating with the United States on issues of counterterrorism. In April 2012, US special operations forces backed the Yemeni military in launching a joint offensive against AQAP and likeminded groups in the south of the country. A US official involved in counterterrorism operations in Yemen defined Hadi as “everything his predecessor wasn’t in terms of his determination, his understanding of the threat [...] his determination to destroy Al Qaeda”. Despite increased US-Yemeni cooperation and some ostensible success on the ground, the intelligence community in the United States still considers AQAP a “significant threat” that “remains intent on targeting the United States and US interests overseas.”<sup>402</sup>

The Arab Awakening also added uncertainty to the US regional policy of non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. US officials had two major concerns. First, they feared that autocratic leaders would resort to the use of WMDs in a desperate attempt to cling to power. Second, and perhaps even more alarming, US officials worried that the regimes would lose control of their WMD stockpiles which could eventually fall into the hands of extremist groups with anti-American agendas. Libya and Syria were cases in point. Since 2004, Libya had started to destroy its WMDs under the supervision of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). This process was abruptly interrupted by the 2011 uprising and ensuing war. After the overthrow of Col. Qaddafi, the US administration and other foreign governments have assisted Libya to restart its operations aimed at securing and eliminating the country’s remaining WMDs. Despite continued instability, the OPCW has recently expressed positive assessments about Libya’s ongoing non-proliferation effort. As for Syria, following credible reports of attacks using WMDs, the United Nations Security Council unanimously approved a resolution in September 2013 requiring the Syrian government to dismantle its chemical weapons program. President Assad agreed to cooperate with the OPCW to destroy Syria’s chemical weapons stockpiles. Such a process successfully ended in summer 2014 when the last of Syria’s chemicals were neutralized on board of a US military vessel stationed in the Mediterranean Sea. Some observers, however, have claimed

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<sup>401</sup> US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Review of the Terrorist Attacks on U.S. Facilities in Benghazi, Libya, September 11-12, 2012*, January 15, 2014, <http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/benghazi2014/benghazi.pdf>; Carla Humud and others, *Al Qaeda-Affiliated Groups: Middle East and Africa* (Congressional Research Service, October 10, 2014), <http://fas.org/spp/crs/mideast/R43756.pdf>.

<sup>402</sup> International Crisis Group, *Yemen: Enduring Conflicts, Threatened Transition*; Mohammed Ghobari, “Analysis: Yemen Leader Basks in U.S. Favor as Drone Strikes Fuel Rage,” *Reuters*, August 13, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/13/us-yemen-usa-analysis-idUSBRE97C0LQ20130813>; Clapper, “Testimony of James R. Clapper Director of National Intelligence in Front of the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” 4.

that the Assad regime has intentionally failed to disclose a number of still functioning chemical weapons facilities.<sup>403</sup>

#### 4) *The special relationship with Israel*

US longstanding concerns about the security of Israel only grew with the beginning of the Arab Awakening. Over the years, in fact, successive Israeli governments had advanced Israel's national interest by carefully nurturing a delicate *modus vivendi* with many of Israel's neighboring Arab governments. Israeli officials had even managed to establish a live-and-let-live relationship with the openly hostile Assad regime in Syria. Nevertheless, the unexpected 2011-12 popular uprisings threatened the stability of Israel's neighbors and cast serious doubts on the future viability of such a system of bilateral relationships on which Israel had long relied for its security.<sup>404</sup>

As of 2014, all the countries sharing borders with Israel have felt the shockwaves of the Arab Awakening. In Egypt, the toppling of President Mubarak has been followed first by the election of an Islamist government led by the Muslim Brotherhood and then by a coup d'état that has established a regime controlled by the Egyptian military. Despite initial US and Israeli concerns, post-Mubarak Egyptian leaders have publicly expressed their commitment to the continuation of the 1979 peace treaty with Israel. On the Egyptian front, the major current threat to Israel's security comes from growing unrest and extremist groups' activity in the Sinai Peninsula. Arguably, the situation in Syria is more worrisome and has more far-reaching effects. For the third consecutive year, President Assad faces an armed opposition that controls large swaths of the country. Although the Syrian-Israeli border has remained relatively calm, the growing role in the conflict of extremist organizations, like Jabhat al Nusra and the Islamic State, represents a very dangerous long-term menace to Israel. Furthermore, protracted civil war in Syria is also threatening the stability of the governments in Lebanon and Jordan. The costs of assisting millions of Syrian refugees have put huge strains on Lebanese and Jordanian finances, to the frustration of local populations. In addition, there is the risk of the Syrian conflict spilling over into its neighbors along sectarian lines. Lebanon, in particular, has already experienced violent clashes between Lebanese Sunnis supporting the Syrian opposition and Lebanese Shiites backing the Assad regime. A final threat to the stability of

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<sup>403</sup> Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, "Libya Completes Destruction of Its Category 1 Chemical Weapons," February 4, 2014, <http://www.opcw.org/news/article/libya-completes-destruction-of-its-category-1-chemical-weapons/>; UN Security Council, "Resolution 2118," September 27, 2013, [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_res\\_2118.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2118.pdf); Lorenzo Ferrigno, Ann Roche, and Richard Roth, "Diplomat: Syria Has Four Chemical Weapons Facilities It Didn't Disclose," *CNN*, October 8, 2014, [http://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/07/world/meast/syria-chemical-weapons/index.html?hpt=imi\\_c2&utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=\\*Mideast%20Brief&utm\\_campaign=2014\\_The%20Middle%20East%20Daily%3B%20Oct.%209](http://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/07/world/meast/syria-chemical-weapons/index.html?hpt=imi_c2&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=*Mideast%20Brief&utm_campaign=2014_The%20Middle%20East%20Daily%3B%20Oct.%209).

<sup>404</sup> Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*.

Israel's neighbors is represented by those people that have traveled to Syria to participate to the civil war and that are likely to return to their home countries inspired by radical ideas. So far, around 2,000 Jordanians have reportedly joined different militant groups fighting in Syria (one of the largest contingents of foreign fighters involved in the country).<sup>405</sup>

### 5) *Democracy promotion*

The Arab Awakening offered the United States a unique opportunity to advance its longstanding ideal interest of promoting democratic values in the Greater Middle East. Demands for democratic reform, in fact, ranked high in the agenda of the protesters that took to the streets in 2011-12. Large protests challenged many Middle Eastern autocratic regimes and, sometimes, even achieved the goal of overthrowing their leadership. The United States welcomed the transitions to more democratic forms of government that began in countries like Egypt, Yemen, and Libya. However, history teaches us that the path toward democracy can be long and grueling. Processes of democratic transition are usually fraught with difficulties and setbacks. In this sense, the Arab Awakening has proved to be no exception.

In order to assess the advancement of democratic values in the five Muslim-majority countries under analysis in this research, we primarily relied on the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (CRHRP) and the World Report (WR) issued in 2014 by the US State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor and by the non-governmental organization Human Rights Watch, respectively.<sup>406</sup>

In July 2013, the Egyptian armed forces staged a coup d'état that removed from power an elected Islamist president. Since then, with the stated objectives of fighting terrorism and restoring law and order in the country, a military-backed government has carried out a systematic crackdown on the opposition. Restrictive measures have especially targeted the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. According to credible estimates, since the July coup, clashes involving protesters and state security forces have resulted in between 1,000 and 2,500 dead, more than 17,000 wounded, and between 16,000 and 19,000 arrests. The CRHRP and the WR identified major issues that still

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<sup>405</sup> Peter Beaumont and Patrick Kingsley, "Israeli Soldiers Wounded in Egypt Border Attack," *The Guardian*, October 22, 2014, [http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/22/israeli-soldiers-wounded-egypt-border-attack?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=\\*Mideast%20Brief&utm\\_campaign=2014\\_The%20Middle%20East%20Daily\\_10.23.14](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/22/israeli-soldiers-wounded-egypt-border-attack?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=*Mideast%20Brief&utm_campaign=2014_The%20Middle%20East%20Daily_10.23.14); Luke Baker, "Amid Regional Turmoil, Israel Looks to Its Firm Bond with Jordan," *Reuters*, October 22, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/10/22/us-mideast-israel-jordan-insight-idUSKCN0IB1G520141022>.

<sup>406</sup> US Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013*, February 2014, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2013&dld=220348#wrapper>; Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2014*, January 2014, [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/wr2014\\_web\\_0.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/wr2014_web_0.pdf).



hinder Egypt's transition toward a more democratic form of government: the excessive use of force by state security forces, including unlawful killings and torture; the suppression of civil liberties, including societal and government restrictions on freedom of expression, press, and assembly; arbitrary arrests; and impunity for state security forces.<sup>407</sup>

After the March 2011 Gulf Cooperation Council military intervention, the Bahraini government and the opposition have tried to resolve their differences through two national dialogues. Neither attempt (the first in July 2011 and the second from February to December 2013) was successful in finding a political solution to the ongoing low-intensity unrest in the country. So far, the government has enacted only modest reforms that have neither significantly diluted its authority nor addressed the demands of the opposition for a fairer distribution of political and economic opportunities. According to the CRHRP and WR, the most serious democracy problems faced by Bahrain include: the inability of Bahraini citizens to change their government peacefully; the continued discrimination against the Shiite population; the lack of consistent accountability for security officers accused of committing human rights violations; politically motivated arrests; and restrictions on civil liberties.<sup>408</sup>

As part of a US-backed and GCC-brokered transition plan, Yemen embarked on a comprehensive national dialogue that lasted from March 2013 to January 2014. The so-called National Dialogue Conference concluded with a blueprint for far-reaching reforms. However, clear consensus has not been reached on a number of contentious and potentially destabilizing issues, such as a power-sharing agreement between North and South and the disarmament of non-state actors. The physical integrity of Yemen continues to be challenged by the Houthi insurgency in the north, the secessionist aspirations of the South, and the presence of extremist groups like AQAP. Additionally, arbitrary killings and other human rights abuses committed by government and non-government groups; widespread corruption at all levels of government, including a corrupt judicial system that is unable to ensure the rule of law; the lack of civilian oversight on state security forces; and a weak central government represent persistent obstacles to Yemen's process of democratization.<sup>409</sup>

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<sup>407</sup> Jeremy Sharp, *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations 05/06/2014* (Congressional Research Service, June 5, 2014), <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf>.

<sup>408</sup> Kenneth Katzman, *Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy 03/10/2014* (Congressional Research Service, October 3, 2014), <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/95-1013.pdf>.

<sup>409</sup> International Crisis Group, *The Huthis: From Saada to Sanaa*, Middle East Report, June 10, 2014, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Yemen/154-the-huthis-from-saada-to-sanaa.pdf>.

Three years after the ouster of Col. Qaddafi, Libya's interim authorities have failed to form a stable government and to assert uncontested control over much of the country's territory. Tellingly, Libya currently displays two opposing national assemblies both claiming to be the legitimate representative of the Libyan people. Moreover, the east and the west of the country, in particular, are plagued by continued fighting among heterogeneous coalitions of rival armed groups. The United Nations has documented the indiscriminate use of military weaponry, abductions, unlawful killings, and the internal displacement of hundreds of thousands of Libyans during the fighting. As of 2014, the absence of a single legitimate political authority, coupled with a marked deteriorating security situation, makes the possibility of enacting meaningful democratic reforms in Libya very unlikely.<sup>410</sup>

The uprising in Syria has not led to either regime change as in Egypt, Yemen, and Libya or to a national dialogue as in Bahrain. The Syrian uprising has instead plunged the country into a protracted state of civil war. Although the Syrian regime has lost control of large parts of the country, President Assad has not been overthrown. In addition, within the anti-Assad opposition, extremist groups with radical agendas have gained the upper hand. Both government loyalists and opposition forces have been accused of perpetrating human rights abuses, carrying out massacres, and engaging in torture. The current situation of lawlessness, instability, and violence in Syria does not allow for any serious discussion on democratic reforms.<sup>411</sup>

All that considered, in the past four years, the Arab Awakening has provided the United States with both challenges and opportunities to advance the US national interest in the Greater Middle East. However, we believe that the failure of the popular uprisings to resolve the political, economic, and social grievances that brought millions of people to the streets in 2011 should be of special concern to US policymakers. In fact, by suppressing or ignoring popular demands for democratic reform, autocratic Middle Eastern regimes may have survived this latest wave of protests but they have not eliminated the root causes at the origin of the unrest. Consequently, the political, economic, and social grievances that went unanswered in 2011 have the potential to reemerge and ignite new protests in the future. Moreover, the 2011 uprisings overwhelmingly started as peaceful protest movements. As illustrated by this research, in most cases such movements did not succeed in achieving meaningful change. Disillusioned protesters may draw the dangerous conclusion that change in the Greater Middle East cannot be achieved by peaceful means; they may in fact buy into

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<sup>410</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard, *Libya: Transition and U.S. Policy 08/09/2014* (Congressional Research Service, September 8, 2014), <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33142.pdf>.

<sup>411</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard and others, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response 17/09/2014* (Congressional Research Service, September 17, 2014), <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33487.pdf>.

the extremists' narrative that only by resorting to violence Middle Eastern people have a chance to improve their conditions. As a result, there is the concrete risk that prospective protest movements will show a more violent nature than those of 2011. Finally, anti-American sentiments were marginal and certainly did not drive the 2011 uprisings. However, the Obama administration's cautious policy of qualified support for the Arab Awakening was seen, particularly by Muslim public opinions, as partly responsible for the inability of the uprisings to fulfill Middle Eastern people's demands for change. This, along with perceived US ongoing close association with local autocratic regimes, and their repressive policies, is likely to increase popular antipathy toward the United States.

In other words, the hitherto overall lack of success of the Arab Awakening has sowed the seeds for future, and possibly more violent and more anti-American, instability and disorder in a region of vital importance to the global advancement of the US national interest. There is some irony in the fact that foreign policies carefully crafted by national policymakers with the primary objective of advancing their country's national interests can in fact contribute to an outcome that will threaten those same interests.

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